Weird Tales

The Unique Magazine

You Fellows Who Want BIG PAY Get into ELECTRICITY

WHY earn $15 or $20 or $30 a week, when in the same six days as an Electrical Expert, when so many men are earning $60 to $100, do it easier and not work half so hard? Why should you remain in a small-pay, no-future job that offers no chance for big promotion—no chance for big income? Fit yourself for a real job. **Get into Electricity.** That's where the big money is being made, and always will be made.

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Dear Mr. Cooke: I was making $25 a week when I enrolled. Now with my own Electrical Shop I make as high as $30 a day. A. J. Daigneault, 225 Worcester, Southbridge, Mass.

Electricity — The Big Pay Field

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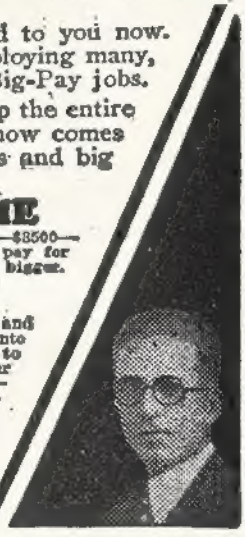

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Weird Tales

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A MAGAZINE of the BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XV NUMBER 6

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, $2.50 a year in the United States, $3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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A LETTER from Bernard Austin Dwyer, of Kingston, New York, is so interesting that we quote it in full: "Having yesterday purchased—as soon as it was out—and last night read the most of WEIRD TALES, I feel impelled to offer a few random ideas and criticisms.

"WEIRD TALES is to me 'the magazine irresistible,' never being on the stalls more than a day before I have it. The well-known—and well-loved—red cover is something that I can not pass by. The magazine offers an excellent evening's entertainment. Nearly all of the stories are good—not Lovecraft, of course, but one can not expect all to equal this giant of literary fantasy. Lovecraft, apart from the unguessed, startling originality of his climaxes, has a quality of tone, a sheer, eery atmosphere of his own, that is at once inimitable and unapproachable. When one reads Lovecraft, one enters into a dream-world in all verity—one tiptoes timidly amid a million shadowy horrors—beastly phantoms of an unguessed midnight potency. There the evil charms and machinations of the Other Gods in the Elder World surround one, and one shudders at the mystic horrors hidden behind the snowy peaks of unknown Kadath in the cold waste, or peering filmy-eyed from beneath the aged and rotting gambrel roofs of archaic Arkham or Kingsport cottages. No—they can't all equal Lovecraft!—but because the sun shines supreme, one doesn't deny light to the lesser luminaries.

"For instance, Henry S. Whitehead is a real artist—though I didn't care so much for his last story, *The Shut Room*—he isn't so convincing outside of the West Indies. But I have greatly enjoyed his stories of those islands—they have truly artistic handling and color, and real atmosphere—beautiful jewelled effects.

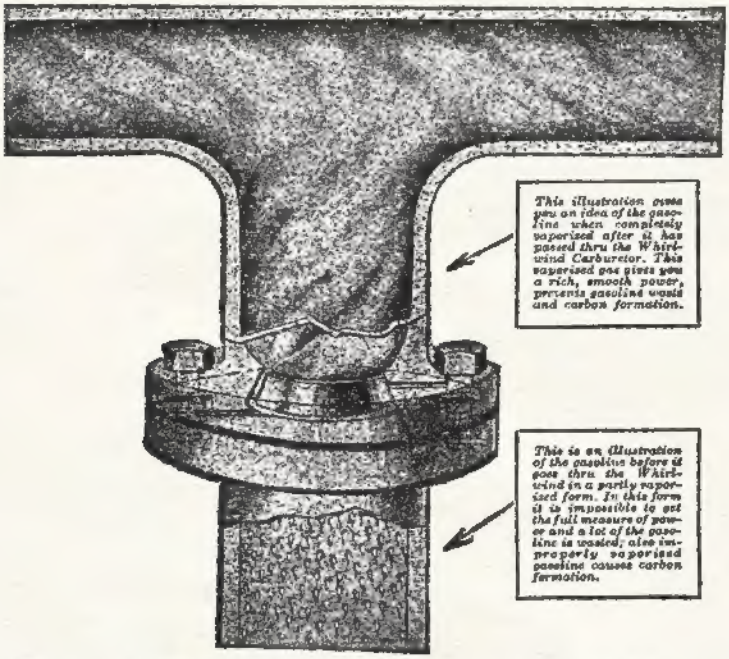
"Clark Ashton Smith is a genius, as great in his way as Lovecraft, a real fantasiste, and it is a very encouraging sign that you are beginning to print his work regularly. I feel sure that many readers of the magazine are capable of appreciating his work.

"E. Hoffmann Price is also an artist—his story about the Oriental rug is fine as the weavings of such a rug itself—a rare web of exotic color.

(Continued on page 726)

Auto Owners Now Save Millions of Gallons of Gas

A new invention called the Whirlwind is actually saving millions of gallons of gasoline for automobile owners. Those who have installed this amazing device on their cars report almost unbelievable gasoline savings. They also report more speed and power, quicker starting and disappearance of carbon.


This illustration gives you an idea of the gasoline when completely vaporized after it has passed thru the Whirlwind Carburetor. This vaporized gas gives you a rich, smooth power, prevents gasoline waste and carbon formation.
This is an illustration of the gasoline before it goes thru the Whirlwind in a partly vaporized form. In this form it is impossible to get the full measure of power and a lot of the gasoline is wasted; also improperly vaporized gasoline causes carbon formation.

The marvelous thing about this Whirlwind is that it works as well on all makes of cars. Reports are received from owners of practically every known make of automobile from Fords to Lincolns and they are all equally enthusiastic in their praise.

FITS ALL CARS

In just a few minutes the Whirlwind can be installed on any make of car, truck or tractor. It's actually less work than changing your oil or putting water in the battery. No drilling, tapping or changes of any kind necessary. It is guaranteed to work perfectly on any make of car, truck or tractor, large or small, new model or old model. The more you drive the more you will save.

SALESMEN AND DISTRIBUTORS WANTED

FREE SAMPLE AND $100.00 A WEEK OFFER

Whirlwind men are making big profits supplying this fast selling device that car owners cannot afford to be without. Good territory still open. Free sample offer and full particulars sent on request. Just check the coupon.

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No matter what kind of a car you have—no matter how big a gas eater it is—the Whirlwind will save you money. We absolutely guarantee that the Whirlwind will more than save its cost in gasoline alone within 30 days, or the trial will cost you nothing. We invite you to test it at our risk and expense. You are to be the sole judge.

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Check here if you are interested in full or part time salesman position.

(Continued from page 724)

"Edmond Hamilton is a good pseudo-scientific thriller, always guaranteeing a half-hour's entertainment. He has vastly improved since writing *The Monster God of Mamurth.*

"Robert E. Howard is not bad. *The Dream Snake* was a wonderful piece of sinister moonlight painting, and *Wolfshead* was about as good. He has written many fine tales since these two, but they are my favorites.

"Seabury Quinn is always good for an hour's pastime. I can't see where so many get their ideas from who declare him supreme. If he wrote such stories as *The Phantom Farmhouse,* I would agree, but not with the present stuff he gets out. Much of the praise of him is undoubtedly mere parrot-talk —people repeating what they hear others say, without knowledge or discrimination. He is, to me, just a good thrill-concocter, neither more nor less, and a good craftsman, handling well his effects. His yarns are always interesting, and usually more or less unpredictable. I think they get better as time goes on. One thing, however, I miss—de Grandin's one-time Gallicisms—his French bulls, so to speak. These used to be really laughable, startling; such as a Frenchman might make when struggling with English. Now, his mistakes —when he remembers to make them—are mechanical, artificial, labored and unconvincing. But that does not do away with the fact that the stories themselves are most fascinating, and I read every one that comes out.

"Now, a word about the illustrations. Harold Markham, writing in the current Eyrie, is right about the cover designs. The work is technically good—but the weird is conspicuous by its absence, and the covers remind one of *Paris Nights,* or an advertisement for *Ziegfeld's Follies.* Raw and rank sex-appeal, trite and obvious; always the inevitable naked woman, and the human, or half-human, beast gloating over her. That has been the motif for over a year. It may be necessary in order to sell the magazine—probably the mind of the general public runs mostly along such lines. This applies to the illustrations, too, which are seldom weird, and usually embody the same obviously flaunted nudity. Not that I have the least objection to the nude, in its place. I have handled it a great deal myself in my own pictorial work, and know that it may be made—as for example in Beardsley—a very effective part of a weird and sinister unit. But that is not the case in the drawings I have referred to. Rankin is a good—an excellent—anatomist, and I have seen some fine work of his. His charcoal originals may be splendid, but they lose too much in reproduction on the rough paper of the magazine. I have seen such good work, and such poor work, by Rankin, that they didn't seem to come from the same man. His present cover has some good points—the green color, the figure of the crouching evil priest, and the outstretched, dressing-gowned arm of de Grandin, holding the sacred ikon. This last is very effective and dramatic—in fact, the arm, and its symbolism, are the best part of the picture.

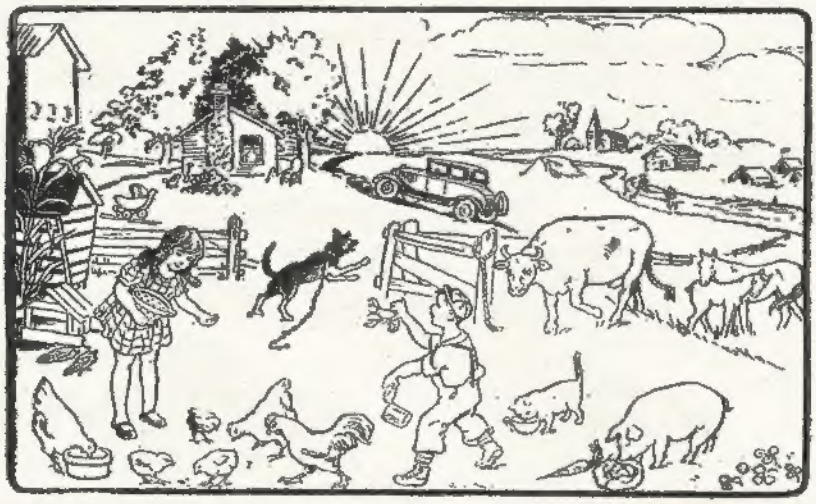
"Doak is sometimes terrible—sometimes very good. He rightly uses pen and ink technique; charcoal and half-tone work are not adapted to the paper

(Continued on page 729)

Win a Buick Sedan

or $2,900.00 in Cash

SOMEONE who answers this ad will receive, absolutely free, a fully equipped 7-passenger Buick Sedan or its full value in cash ($2,000.00) and $900.00 in cash for promptness. We are also giving away 6 Three Window Fordor Ford Sedans, an Eastman Home Moving Picture Outfit, a Shetland Pony, a Radio, Gold Watches, Silverware and many other valuable prizes—besides Hundreds of Dollars in Cash to people who solve our puzzle and win our prizes. Already we have given away more than $200,000.00 in cash and prizes to advertise our business. Miss Jewell Casey won $3,720.00, Mr. I. Nystrom won $3,375.00, Miss Anna Linke won $2,320.00, Mr. M. D. Reidman won $3,920.00, Mrs. Robt. Ellington won $1,750.00 and Mr. E. N. Garrett won $2,320.00. More than $7,500.00 in prizes will be awarded in this offer, which is guaranteed by an old reliable company with a reputation of many years of honest dealings and is open to anyone living in the United State outside of Chicago.



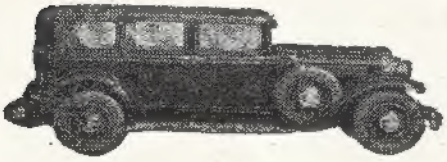
Solve This Puzzle

There are many objects in the picture of the barnyard above, such as dog, girl, fence, automobile, rooster, boy, tent, etc. If you can find 5 starting with the letter "C," fill in the coupon below (or write them on a separate sheet of paper) and send it to me at once.

$900.00 Cash Given for Promptness

In addition to the 7-passenger Buick Sedan and 6 Ford Sedans and the many other valuable prizes—besides Hundreds of Dollars in Cash—I am also going to give an extra added Cash prize of $900.00 for Promptness to the winner of the Buick Sedan, making a total of $2,900.00 you may win. In case of ties duplicate prizes will be awarded, and any winner may have cash instead of the prize won if so preferred. Get busy right away. Find 5 objects starting with the letter "C," fill in the coupon below (or write them on a separate sheet of paper) and send it to me just as soon as possible to qualify for an opportunity to share in the $7,500.00 total grand prizes. EVERYBODY PROFITS. Who knows but that you may be the Lucky First Prize Winner. It pays to act promptly.

Mail Today



Robert Harrison, Mgr., Dept. 4395,
315 So. Peoria St., Chicago, Ill.

The objects starting with the letter "C" are:_____

My Name_____

Address_____

They dared Officer Kane to play

..and his music held them spellbound

ETHEL'S house party was at its height—when suddenly there came an ominous knocking at the door. Ethel ran to open it and—there stood Police Officer Kane.

"I want to see the man of the house," thundered Kane.

"I'm sorry," stammered Ethel nervously, "but my father is not at home."

"Well, what's going on in here anyway?" continued the officer sternly. "Everyone on the block is complainin' of the noise. I've a good mind to arrest the lot of you."

Ethel was mortified—what a disgrace!

"Oh, please," pleaded Ethel, "please don't do anything like that."

Then Kane burst out laughing.

"Don't worry, lassie—you were all havin' such a fine time I couldn't help droppin' in," he explained.

"Oh," sighed Ethel, "how you frightened me. Won't you join us?"

Kane Joins the Party

"Ha," laughed Kane, as the Victrola started again, "why must you play that canned music—can't any of you play this beautiful piano? Sure, I'd like to give you a tune myself."

"I dare you to play for us," shouted Ted Strong.

"I'm afraid I'll have to be goin'," stammered Kane, embarrassed.

"Mr. Kane, I think you might play for me after the fright you gave me," smiled Ethel.

"Well, b'gorry, maybe I will," agreed the officer. And as he sat down at the piano everyone laughed. But the noise stopped when he struck the first rollicking notes of the famous "Song of the Vagabonds."

"More—more." "That's great — play another," they all shouted as the last notes of that snappy march song died away. Kane then started that stirring old soldier song, "On the Road to Mandalay," following it with song hits from the latest shows.

"Well," he laughed, as they finally let him get up from the piano, "I'll have to be on my way now."

"Thank you for your lovely music,"

said Ethel. "You must be playing a good many years!"

"Sure and I haven't been playin' long at all." Then the questions came thick and fast: "How did you ever learn so quickly?" "When do you find time to practice?" "Who was your teacher?"

Kane Tells His Story

"Well, to tell you the truth, I had no teacher. I've always loved music but I couldn't take regular lessons on account of my duties as a policeman. Then one evenin' I saw a U. S. School of Music advertisement, tellin' of a new way of learnin' to play. I didn't believe it myself but I sent for their Free Demonstration Lesson that showed me how easy it was, so I wrote for the whole course.

"There were no tiresome scales or tedious exercises. I played real pieces almost from the start. Now I'm playin' classical numbers or jazz, havin' the time of my life."

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This is not the story of just one isolated case. Over half a million people have learned to play by this simple method. You can, too. Even if you don't know one note from another you'll grasp it in no time. First it *tells* you how to do a thing—then it *shows* you how in pictures—then you do it yourself and *hear* it.

You teach yourself—right at home—without any uninteresting finger exercises, tedious scales or other humdrum methods.

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To prove how practical this course is, the U. S. School of Music has arranged a typical demonstration lesson and explanatory booklet which you may have Free. They show how any one can learn to play his favorite instrument by note in less than half the time and at a fraction of the cost of old slow methods. The Booklet will also tell you all about the amazing new *Automatic Finger Control*.

Don't delay—act at once—fill in and mail the coupon below today—no obligation whatever.

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Hawaiian Steel Guitar
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U. S. School of Music
466 Brunswick Bldg., New York City

Please send me your free book, "Music Lessons in Your Own Home," with introduction by Dr. Frank Crane, Free Demonstration Lesson and particulars of your easy payment plan. I am interested in the following course:

Have You ..... Instrument? .....

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

(Continued from page 726)

of the magazine—and at times he gets peculiar, weird effects; in the heading to *Suzanne,* for instance, and *The Shut Room,* both in this issue. The highwayman's pistol should be longer and heavier—horse-pistols, such as he would be likely to carry, were usually of good size—but the swampy woods are fine. He also did well with Robert E. Howard's *Rattle of Bones,* and I have seen several things of his striking the true weird note. He has possibilities.

"C. C. Senf is a perfect technician. His pictures have usually been as well-drawn, and as totally lacking in every element of eery effect, as an illustration in the *Cosmopolitan Magazine.* But his heading to Frank Belknap Long's *On Icy Kinarth* is absolutely different. If this isn't imaginative and weird, I have never seen a picture that was. The primitive man staring upward, and the swarming cloud of flying phantom dragons, are surely monstrously effective. It seems to me the best picture you have ever printed, and I wish the whole magazine could be so illustrated. The poem is worthy of the picture.

"In conclusion, I hope you have not been offended by my, at times, unfavorable comments. The magazine is, truly, as I have said, 'irresistible' to me, and I never miss a copy. But all things earthly can be improved, and these are my honest opinions, not intended as slams or brickbats. I know that you like to hear your readers' true opinions, favorable and otherwise, for it is only so that you can estimate their reactions.

"By the way—whatever you do,

(Continued on page 731)

MOULDING A MIGHTY ARM

Get a 17 Inch Bicep

Complete Course on Arm Building

ONLY 25c

Get an arm of might with the power and grip to obey your physical desires. You can now build your arm from a scrawny piece of skin and bone to one of huge muscular size. I don't mean just a 17-inch bicep but a 15-inch forearm and an 8-inch wrist. This specially prepared course will build every muscle in the arm because it has been scientifically worked out for that purpose. You can develop a pair of triceps shaped like a horseshoe and just as strong, and a pair of biceps that will show their double head formation. The sinewy cable between the biceps and elbow will be deep and thick with wire cable ligaments. In that arm of yours, the forearm will belly with bulk, and the great supinator lifting muscle you can make into a column of power, while your wrist will grow alive and writhe with cordy sinew. All this you can get for 25 cents—send for this course today and you can have a he-man's arm built to be as beautiful, brawny and magnificent as the village blacksmith's.

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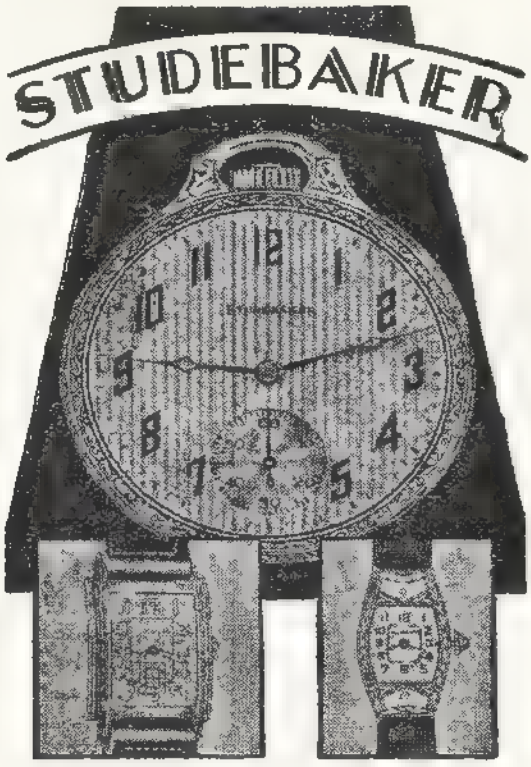

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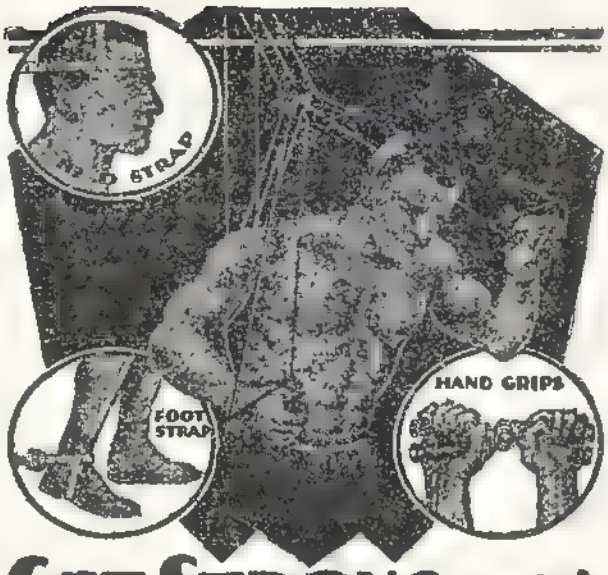
(Continued from page 729)

don't discard the red-bordered, white-lettered cover!"

E. J. Brown, of Apponaug, Rhode Island, who signs himself "a fascinated reader," writes to the Eyrie: "I have been reading WEIRD TALES for about a year and it is the only magazine that keeps me interested. All your tales are interesting but I like the gruesome ones best. Two stories, *The Space-Eaters* and *The Copper Bowl,* still stick in my mind. I am very much in favor of reprints."

A letter from H. P. Stiller, of New York City, says: "I have been a reader of your magazine from the first issue printed, something like seven years ago, I believe. I have always experienced a taste for the outré in fiction, which has always been gratified in its pages. One of your greatest authors undoubtedly is H. P. Lovecraft. Stories like *The Dunwich Horror* are classics and should be preserved for posterity. I would suggest them offered in a book—and would they sell! Let me suggest that you reprint one of Lovecraft's early masterpieces, namely: *The Rats in the Walls.* I could wager that it would get first choice in the monthly readers' vote. Please let us readers know through the Eyrie whether Mr. Lovecraft is working on a new story or not; he has been absent for a number of months, and every new copy arouses in me a forlorn hope that, perhaps, your pre-showing for the month ahead contains his name. I'm still hoping! By the way, my choice for April's best story is Whitehead's *The Shut Room."* [We are as anxious to publish new Lovecraft stories as you

(Continued on page 732)



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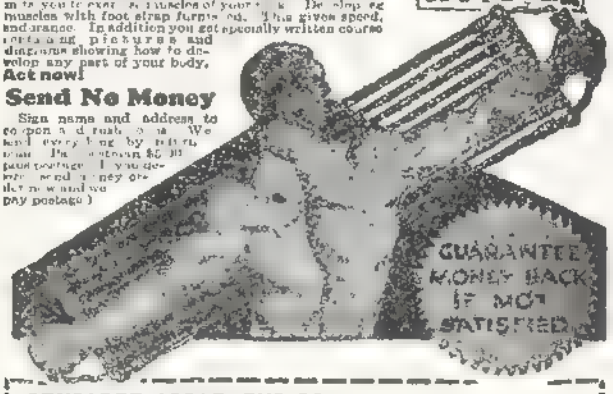

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(Continued from page 731)

are to read them. Mr. Lovecraft has promised us some new thrillers for the near future.—THE EDITOR.]

Writes Nelson Williams, of St. Charles, Illinois: "Your best contributor is Seabury Quinn. No doubt he is a medical doctor, as is evidenced by some of the grisly surgeries performed by his fiction character, Dr. Jules de Grandin. Robert E. Howard is superb. Keep him clacking that typewriter. Otis Adelbert Kline is astounding. What an imagination that man has! Edmond Hamilton ranks as a close second to Kline, in weird science literature. I should like to see more stories of Cornwall by Dr. David H. Keller."

"I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES since almost the first number," writes Mrs. H. Snyder, of Lake Wales, Florida, "and have never missed one since, and it certainly is the only magazine of which I can say as much. I think the great success of WEIRD TALES must be due to the fact that it is the only magazine of its kind. Others may follow, but none will ever attain such popularity. In my opinion, two of the outstanding stories printed in the past have been *The Space-Eaters* by Frank Belknap Long, Jr., and *The Dunwich Horror* by Lovecraft. I am getting a great thrill out of *The Black Monarch*, and Jules de Grandin in *Drums of Damballah* is as delightful as usual. Success to your magazine—may it never die."

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue of WEIRD TALES? It will help us keep the magazine in accordance with your wishes if you will let us know. The most popular story in the April issue, as shown by your votes, was *The Plant Revolt* by Edmond Hamilton. *The Dust of Egypt* by Seabury Quinn took second place.

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE JUNE WEIRD TALES ARE:

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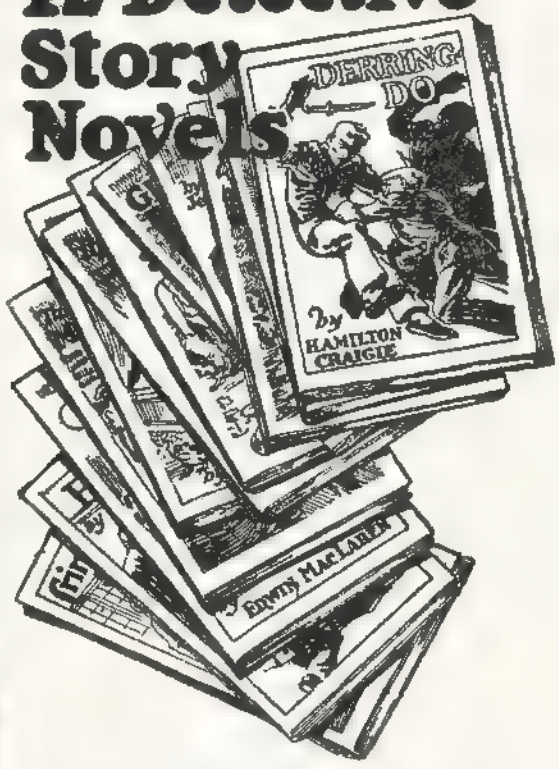

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The WORM-KING

by DONALD WANDREI

In a fabulous land, in a fabulous time,
  There lived and there ruled on a crumbling throne
A worm that was born of the deep sea-slime,
Whose white fat folds were covered with grime,
  And it ruled alone.
Not a creature lived in all the land,
  And the little red eyes in the serpent's head
Saw only a realm of wet black sand
  And the slimy things of the slimy dead
Of its cold sea-tomb.
  Not a thing disputed the lordly worm
Where it lived and ruled in the endless gloom,
  Nor ever a hand caressed its fat;
Through its foul dead realm were it ever to squirm,
  All it would find was a plump drowned rat
And dead men's bones.
  As deathless and old as the deathless sea,
  As deathless as ever a worm can be,
  And the worm is king for eternity,
It reigned on its multiple thrones.
  But the musty tale can never be told
Of the realm that rose from stale sea-waves,
  Of the white worm-king and the fat white fold,
  Of the pulpy head that never grows old,
For the tale is the grave's.

NEXT MONTH

A superb array of gripping weird masterpieces is scheduled for the July issue of WEIRD TALES, on sale June 1.

The Bride of Dewer

by Seabury Quinn

Old Dewer, goblin huntsman of the North, rides through this, the weirdest story yet written about Jules de Grandin.

Earthworms of Karma

by Lon Dexter

An interplanetary story that is different—an amazing narrative of a trip to Mars and the utterly strange adventures that befell the voyagers.

The Death Lord

by Edmond Hamilton

All life in Chicago was blotted out in an hour by a plague—then in Philadelphia. The startling story of a world domed by a bacteriologist's lust for power.

Dead Man's Fingers

by Harold Simpson

As the woman fled through the night, she knew that her husband would hold her in death as he had done in life.

The Black Druid

by Frank Belknap Long, Jr.

A short tale that compresses a world of cosmic horror in its few pages.

The Bagheeta

by Val Lewton

A fascinating tale of the Caucasus, of a curious superstition, and the search for the were-leopard that menaced the community with the destruction of its young men.

The Moon of Skulls

by Robert E. Howard

A mighty picture of the grim glories and hideous splendors of Atlantis is painted in the concluding installment of this powerful story.

The Haunted Wood of Adoure

by Elliot O'Donnell

An unusual ghost-story is this terrifying experience of a French executioner, for it was the ghost of the living and not of the dead that tormented him.

These are some of the super-excellent stories that will appear in the July issue of WEIRD TALES.

July Issue on Sale June 1

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The Moon of

by

ROBERT E HOWARD

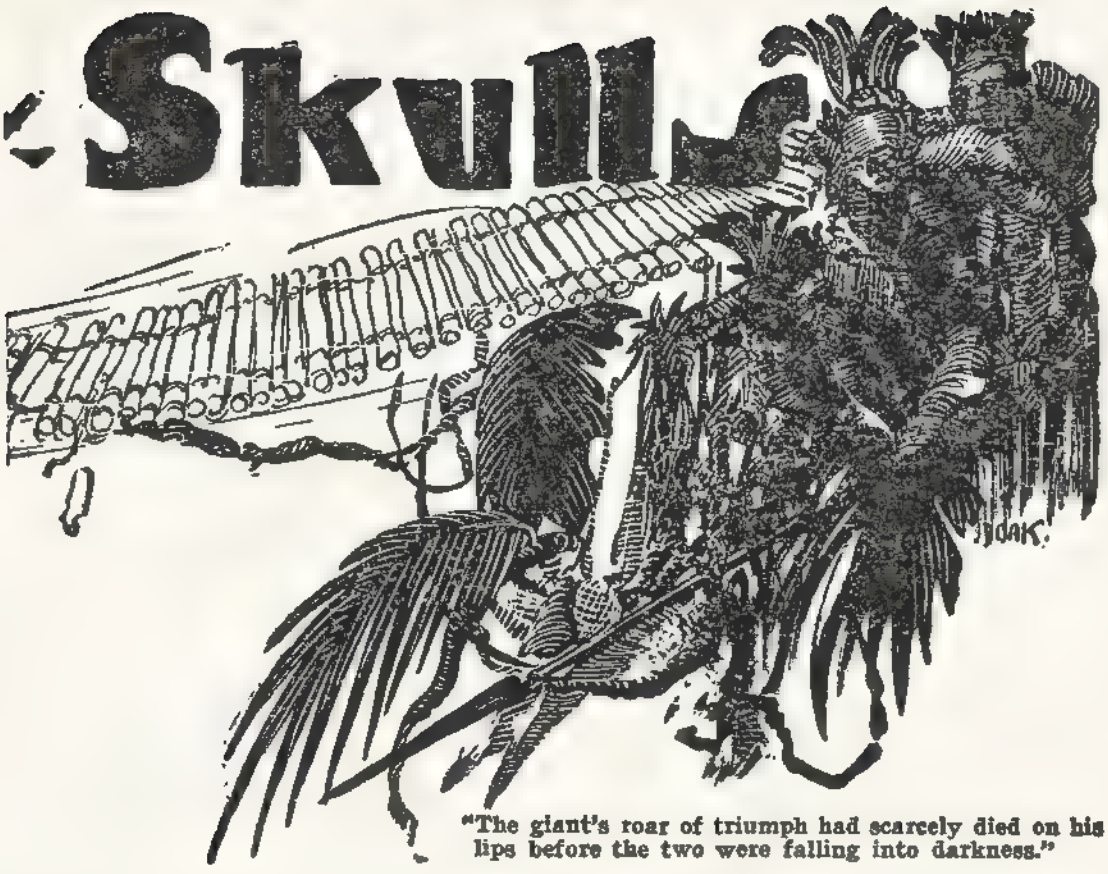
"The wise men know what wicked things
  Are written on the sky;
They trim sad lamps, they touch sad strings
  Hearing the heavy purple wings,
Where the forgotten Seraph kings
  Still plot how God shall die."
—Chesterton.

1. A Man Comes Seeking

A GREAT black shadow lay across the land, cleaving the red flame of the sunset. To the man who toiled up the jungle trail it loomed like a symbol of death and horror, a menace brooding and terrible, like the shadow of a stealthy assassin flung upon some candle-lit wall.

Yet it was only the shadow of the great crag which reared up in front of him, the first outpost of the grim foothills which were his goal. He halted a moment at its foot, staring upward where it rose blackly limned

Skull



"The giant's roar of triumph had scarcely died on his lips before the two were falling into darkness."

against the dying sun. He could have sworn that he caught the hint of a movement at the top, as he stared, hand shielding his eyes, but the fading glare dazzled him and he could not be sure. Was it a man who darted to cover? A man, or——?

He shrugged his shoulders and fell to examining the rough trail which led up and over the brow of the crag. At first glance it seemed that only a mountain goat could scale it, but closer investigation showed numbers of fingerholds drilled into the solid rock. It would be a task to try his powers to the utmost but he had not come a thousand miles to turn back now.

He dropped the large pouch he wore at his shoulder, and laid down the clumsy musket, retaining only his long rapier, dagger, and one of his pistols. These he strapped behind him, and without a backward glance over the darkening trail he had come, he started the long ascent. He was a tall man, long-armed and iron-muscled, yet again and again he was forced to halt in his upward climb and rest for a moment, clinging like an ant to the precipitous face of the cliff. Night fell swiftly and the crag above him was a shadowy blur in which he was forced to feel with his fingers, blindly, for the holes which served him as precarious ladder. Below him, the night noises of the tropical jungle broke forth, yet it appeared to him that even these sounds were subdued and hushed as though the great black hills looming above threw a spell of silence and fear even over the jungle creatures.

On up he struggled, and now to make his way harder, the cliff bulged outward near its summit and the strain on nerve and muscle became heart-breaking. Time and again a hold slipped and he escaped falling

by a hair's breadth. But every fiber in his lean hard body was perfectly co-ordinated, and his fingers were like steel talons with the grip of a vise. His progress grew slower and slower but on he went until at last he saw the cliff's brow splitting the stars a scant twenty feet above him.

And even as he looked, a vague bulk heaved into view, toppled on the edge and hurtled down toward him with a great rush of air about it. Flesh crawling, he flattened himself against the cliff's face and felt a heavy blow against his shoulder, only a glancing blow, but even so it nearly tore him from his hold, and as he fought desperately to right himself, he heard a reverberating crash among the rocks far below. Cold sweat beading his brow, he looked up. Who—or what—had shoved that boulder over the cliff edge? He was brave, as the bones on many a battlefield could testify, but the thought of dying like a sheep, helpless and with no chance of resistance, turned his blood cold.

Then a wave of fury supplanted his fear and he renewed his climb with reckless speed. The expected second boulder did not come, however, and no living thing met his sight as he clambered up over the edge and leaped erect, sword flashing from its scabbard.

He stood upon a sort of plateau which debouched into a very broken hilly country some half mile to the west. The crag he had just mounted jutted out from the rest of the heights like a sullen promontory, looming above the sea of waving foliage below, now dark and mysterious in the tropic night.

Silence ruled here in absolute sovereignty. No breeze stirred the somber depths below, and no footfall rustled amid the stunted bushes which cloaked the plateau, yet that boulder which had almost hurled the climber to his death had not fallen by chance. What beings moved among these grim hills? The tropical darkness fell about the lone wanderer like a heavy veil through which the yellow stars blinked evilly. The steams of the rotting jungle vegetation floated up to him as tangible as a thick fog, and making a wry face he strode away from the cliff, heading boldly across the plateau, sword in one hand and pistol in the other.

There was an uncomfortable feeling of being watched in the very air. The silence remained unbroken save for the soft swishing that marked the stranger's cat-like tread through the tall upland grass, yet the man sensed that living things glided before and behind him and on each side. Whether man or beast trailed him he knew not, nor did he care over-much, for he was prepared to fight human or devil who barred his way. Occasionally he halted and glanced challengingly about him, but nothing met his eye except the shrubs which crouched like short dark ghosts about his trail, blended and blurred in the thick hot darkness through which the very stars seemed to struggle, redly.

At last he came to the place where the plateau broke into the higher slopes and there he saw a clump of trees blocked out solidly in the lesser shadows. He approached warily, then halted as his gaze, growing somewhat accustomed to the darkness, made out a vague form among the somber trunks which was not a part of them. He hesitated. The figure neither advanced nor fled. A dim form of silent menace, it lurked as if in wait. A brooding horror hung over that still cluster of trees.

THE stranger advanced warily, blade extended. Closer. Straining his eyes for some hint of threatening motion. He decided that the figure was human but he was puzzled at its lack of movement. Then the reason became apparent—it was the

corpse of a black man that stood among those trees, held erect by spears through his body, nailing him to the boles. One arm was extended in front of him, held in place along a great branch by a dagger through the wrist, the index finger straight as if the corpse pointed stiffly—back along the way the stranger had come.

The meaning was obvious; that mute grim signpost could have but one significance—death lay beyond. The man who stood gazing upon that grisly warning rarely laughed, but now he allowed himself the luxury of a sardonic smile. A thousand miles of land and sea—ocean travel and jungle travel—and now they expected to turn him back with such mummery—whoever they were.

He resisted the temptation to salute the corpse, as an action wanting in decorum, and pushed on boldly through the grove, half expecting an attack from the rear or an ambush.

Nothing of the sort occurred, however, and emerging from the trees, he found himself at the foot of a rugged incline, the first of a series of slopes. He strode stolidly upward in the night, nor did he even pause to reflect how unusual his actions must have appeared to a sensible man. The average man would have camped at the foot of the crag and waited for morning before even attempting to scale the cliffs. But this was no ordinary man. Once his objective was in sight, he followed the straightest line to it, without a thought of obstacles, whether day or night. What was to be done, must be done. He had reached the outposts of the kingdom of fear at dusk, and invading its inmost recesses by night seemed to follow as a matter of course.

As he went up the boulder-strewn slopes the moon rose, lending its air of illusion, and in its light the broken hills ahead loomed up like the black spires of wizards' castles. He kept his eyes fixed on the dim trail he was following, for he knew not when another boulder might come hurtling down the inclines. He expected an attack of any sort and, naturally, it was the unexpected which really happened.

Suddenly from behind a great rock stepped a black man; an ebony giant in the pale moonlight, a long spear blade gleaming silver in his hand, his headpiece of ostrich plumes floating above him like a white cloud. He lifted the spear in a ponderous salute, and spoke in the dialect of the river-tribes:

"This is not the white man's land. Who is my white brother in his own kraal and why does he come into the Land of Skulls?"

"My name is Solomon Kane," the white man answered in the same language. "I seek the vampire queen of Negari."

"Few seek. Fewer find. None return," answered the other cryptically.

"Will you lead me to her?"

"You bear a long dagger in your right hand. There are no lions here."

"A serpent dislodged a boulder. I thought to find snakes in the bushes."

The giant acknowledged this interchange of subtleties with a grim smile and a brief silence fell.

"Your life," said the black presently, "is in my hand."

Kane smiled thinly. "I carry the lives of many warriors in *my* hand."

The negro's gaze traveled uncertainly up and down the shimmery length of the Englishman's sword. Then he shrugged his mighty shoulders and let his spear point sink to the earth.

"You bear no gifts," said he; "but follow me and I will lead you to the Terrible One, the Mistress of Doom, the Red Woman, Nakari, who rules the land of Negari."

He stepped aside and motioned Kane to precede him, but the Englishman, his mind on a spear-thrust in the back, shook his head.

"Who am I that I should walk in front of my brother? We be two chiefs—let us walk side by side."

In his heart Kane railed that he should be forced to use such unsavory diplomacy with a black savage, but he showed no sign. The giant bowed with a certain barbaric majesty and together they went up the hill trail, unspeaking. Kane was aware that men were stepping from hiding-places and falling in behind them, and a surreptitious glance over his shoulder showed him some two score black warriors trailing out behind them in two wedge-shaped lines. The moonlight glittered on sleek black bodies, on waving headgears and long cruel spear blades.

"My brothers are like leopards," said Kane courteously; "they lie in the low bushes and no eyes see them; they steal through the high grass and no man hears their coming."

The black chief acknowledged the compliment with a courtly inclination of his lion-like head, that set the plumes whispering.

"The mountain leopard is our brother, oh chieftain. Our feet are like drifting smoke but our arms are like iron. When they strike, blood drips red and men die."

Kane sensed an undercurrent of menace in the tone. There was no actual hint of threat on which he might base his suspicions, but the sinister minor note was there. He said no more for a space and the strange band moved silently upward in the moonlight like a cavalcade of black specters led by a white ghost. The trail grew steeper and more rocky, winding in and out among crags and gigantic boulders. Suddenly a great chasm opened before them, spanned by a natural bridge of rock, at the foot of which the leader halted.

KANE stared at the abyss curiously. It was some forty feet wide, and looking down, his gaze was swallowed by impenetrable blackness, hundreds of feet deep, he knew. On the other side rose crags dark and forbidding.

"Here," said the black chief, "begin the true borders of Nakari's realm."

Kane was aware that the warriors were casually closing in on him. His fingers instinctively tightened about the hilt of the rapier which he had not sheathed. The air was suddenly supercharged with tension.

"Here, too," the black man said, "they who bring no gifts to Nakari—*die!*"

The last word was a shriek, as if the thought had transformed the speaker into a maniac, and as he screamed it, the great black arm went back and then forward with a ripple of mighty muscles, and the long spear leaped at Kane's breast.

Only a born fighter could have avoided that thrust. Kane's instinctive action saved his life—the great blade grazed his ribs as he swayed aside and returned the blow with a flashing thrust that killed a warrior who jostled between him and the chief at that instant.

Spears flashed in the moonlight, and Kane, parrying one and bending under the thrust of another, sprang out upon the narrow bridge where only one could come at him at a time.

None cared to be first. They stood upon the brink and thrust at him, crowding forward when he retreated, giving back when he pressed them. Their spears were longer than his rapier but he more than made up for the difference and the great odds by his scintillant skill and the cold ferocity of his attack.

They wavered back and forth and then suddenly a black giant leaped from among his fellows and charged out upon the bridge like a wild

buffalo, shoulders hunched, spear held low, eyes gleaming with a look not wholly sane. Kane leaped back before the onslaught, leaped back again, striving to avoid that stabbing spear and to find an opening for his point. He sprang to one side and found himself reeling on the edge of the bridge with eternity gaping beneath him. The blacks yelled in savage exultation as he swayed and fought for his balance, and the giant on the bridge roared and plunged at the rocking white man.

Kane parried with all his strength —a feat few swordsman could have accomplished, off balance as he was —saw the cruel spear blade flash by his cheek—felt himself falling backward into the abyss. A desperate effort, and he gripped the spear shaft, righted himself and ran the spearman through the body. The black's great red cavern of a mouth spouted blood and with a dying effort he hurled himself blindly against his foe. Kane, with his heels over the bridge's edge, was unable to avoid him and they toppled over together, to disappear silently into the depths below.

So swiftly had it all happened that the warriors stood stunned. The giant's roar of triumph had scarcely died on his lips before the two were falling into the darkness. Now the rest of the negroes came out on the bridge to peer down curiously, but no sound came up from the dark void.

2. *The People of the Stalking Death*

"Their gods were sadder than the sea,
Gods of a wandering will,
Who cried for blood like beasts at night
Sadly, from hill to hill."

—*Chesterton.*

As KANE fell he followed his fighting instinct, twisting in midair so that when he struck, were it ten or a thousand feet below, he would land on top of the man who fell with him.

The end came suddenly—much more suddenly than the Englishman had thought for. He lay half stunned for an instant, then looking up, saw dimly the narrow bridge banding the sky above him, and the forms of the warriors, limned in the moonlight and grotesquely foreshortened as they leaned over the edge. He lay still, knowing that the beams of the moon did not pierce the deeps in which he was hidden, and that to those watchers he was invisible. Then when they vanished from view he began to review his present plight. The black man was dead, and only for the fact that his corpse had cushioned the fall, Kane would have been dead likewise, for they had fallen a considerable distance. As it was, the white man was stiff and bruised.

He drew his sword from the negro's body, thankful that it had not been broken, and began to grope about in the darkness. His hand encountered the edge of what seemed a cliff. He had thought that he was on the bottom of the chasm and that its impression of great depth had been a delusion, but now he decided that he had fallen on a ledge, part of the way down. He dropped a small stone over the side, and after what seemed a very long time he heard the faint sound of its striking far below.

Somewhat at a loss as to how to proceed, he drew flint and steel from his belt and struck them to some tinder, warily shielding the light with his hands. The faint illumination showed a large ledge jutting out from the side of the cliff, that is, the side next the hills, to which he had been attempting to cross. He had fallen close to the edge and it was only by the narrowest margin that he had escaped sliding off it, not knowing his position.

Crouching there, his eyes seeking to accustom themselves to the abysmal gloom, he made out what seemed

to be a darker shadow in the shadows of the wall. On closer examination he found it to be an opening large enough to admit his body standing erect. A cavern, he assumed, and though its appearance was dark and forbidding in the extreme, he entered, groping his way when the tinder burned out.

Where it led to, he naturally had no idea, but any action was preferable to sitting still until the mountain vultures plucked his bones. For a long way the cave floor tilted upward—solid rock beneath his feet—and Kane made his way with some difficulty up the rather steep slant, slipping and sliding now and then. The cavern seemed a large one, for at no time after entering it could he touch the roof, nor could he, with a hand on one wall, reach the other.

At last the floor became level and Kane sensed that the cave was much larger there. The air seemed better, though the darkness was just as impenetrable. Suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks. From somewhere in front of him there came a strange indescribable rustling. Without warning something smote him in the face and slashed wildly. All about him sounded the eery murmurings of many small wings and suddenly Kane smiled crookedly, amused, relieved and chagrined. Bats, of course. The cave was swarming with them. Still it was a shaky experience, and as he went on and the wings whispered through the vasty emptiness of the great cavern, Kane's Puritan mind found space to dally with a bizarre thought—had he wandered into Hell by some strange means, and were these in truth bats, or were they lost souls winging through everlasting night?

Then, thought Solomon Kane, I will soon confront Satan himself—and even as he thought this, his nostrils were assailed by a horrid scent fetid and repellent. The scent grew as he went slowly on, and Kane swore softly, though he was not a profane man. He sensed that the smell betokened some hidden threat, some unseen malevolence, inhuman and deathly, and his somber mind sprang at supernatural conclusions. However, he felt perfect confidence in his ability to cope with any fiend or demon, armored as he was in unshakable faith of creed and the knowledge of the rightness of his cause.

What followed happened suddenly. He was groping his way along when in front of him two narrow yellow eyes leaped up in the darkness—eyes that were cold and expressionless, too hideously close-set for human eyes and too high for any four-legged beast. What horror had thus reared itself up in front of him?

This is Satan, thought Kane as the eyes swayed above him, and the next instant he was battling for his life with the darkness that seemed to have taken tangible form and thrown itself about his body and limbs in great slimy coils. Those coils lapped his sword arm and rendered it useless; with the other hand he groped for dagger or pistol, flesh crawling as his fingers slipped from slick scales, while the hissing of the monster filled the cavern with a cold pæan of terror.

There in the black dark to the accompaniment of the bats' leathery rustlings, Kane fought like a rat in the grip of a mouse-snake, and he could feel his ribs giving and his breath going before his frantic left hand closed on his dagger hilt.

Then with a volcanic twist and wrench of his steel-thewed body he tore his left arm partly free and plunged the keen blade again and again to the hilt in the sinuous writhing terror which enveloped him, feeling at last the quivering coils loosen and slide from his limbs to lie about his feet like huge cables.

The mighty serpent lashed wildly in its death struggles, and Kane, avoiding its bone-shattering blows, reeled

away in the darkness, laboring for breath. If his antagonist had not been Satan himself, it had been Satan's nearest earthly satellite, thought Solomon, hoping devoutly that he would not be called upon to battle another in the darkness there.

IT SEEMED to him that he had been walking through the blackness for ages and he began to wonder if there were any end to the cave when a glimmer of light pierced the darkness. He thought it to be an outer entrance a great way off, and started forward swiftly, but to his astonishment, he brought up short against a blank wall after taking a few strides. Then he perceived that the light came through a narrow crack in the wall, and feeling over this wall he found it to be of different material from the rest of the cave, consisting, apparently, of regular blocks of stone joined together with mortar of some sort—an indubitably man-built wall.

The light streamed between two of these stones, where the mortar had crumbled away. Kane ran his hands over the surface with an interest beyond his present needs. The work seemed very old and very much superior to what might be expected of a tribe of ignorant negroes.

He felt the thrill of the explorer and discoverer. Certainly no white man had ever seen this place and lived to tell of it, for when he had landed on the dank West Coast some months before, preparing to plunge into the interior, he had had no hint of such a country as this. The few white men who knew anything at all of Africa with whom he had talked, had never even mentioned the Land of Skulls or the she-fiend who ruled it.

Kane thrust against the wall cautiously. The structure seemed weakened from age—a vigorous shove and it gave perceptibly. He hurled himself against it with all his weight and a whole section of wall gave way with a crash, precipitating him into a dimly lighted corridor amid a heap of stone, dust and mortar.

He sprang up and looked about, expecting the noise to bring a horde of wild spearmen. Utter silence reigned. The corridor in which he now stood was much like a long narrow cave itself, save that it was the work of man. It was several feet wide and the roof was many feet above his head. Dust lay ankle-deep on the floor as if no foot had trod there for countless centuries, and the dim light, Kane decided, filtered in somehow through the roof or ceiling, for nowhere did he see any doors or windows. At last he decided the source was the ceiling itself, which was of a peculiar phosphorescent quality.

He set off down the corridor, feeling uncomfortably like a gray ghost moving along the gray halls of death and decay. The evident antiquity of his surroundings depressed him, making him sense vaguely the fleeting and futile existence of mankind. That he was now on top of the earth he believed, since light of a sort came in, but where, he could not even offer a conjecture. This was a land of enchantment—a land of horror and fearful mysteries, the jungle and river natives had said, and he had gotten whispered hints of its terrors ever since he had set his back to the Slave Coast and ventured into the hinterlands alone.

Now and then he caught a low indistinct murmur which seemed to come through one of the walls, and he at last came to the conclusion that he had stumbled onto a secret passage in some castle or house. The natives who had dared speak to him of Negari, had whispered of a ju-ju city built of stone, set high amid the grim black crags of the fetish hills.

Then, thought Kane, it may be that I have blundered upon the very thing I sought and am in the midst of that city of terror. He halted, and choosing a place at random, began to loosen the mortar with his dagger. As he

worked he again heard that low murmur, increasing in volume as he bored through the wall, and presently the point pierced through, and looking through the aperture it had made, he saw a strange and fantastic scene.

He was looking into a great chamber, whose walls and floors were of stone, and whose mighty roof was upheld by gigantic stone columns, strangely carved. Ranks of feathered black warriors lined the walls and a double column of them stood like statues before a throne set between two stone dragons which were larger than elephants. These men he recognized, by their bearing and general appearance, to be tribesmen of the warriors he had fought at the chasm. But his gaze was drawn irresistibly to the great, grotesquely ornamented throne. There, dwarfed by the ponderous splendor about her, a woman reclined. A black woman she was, young and of a tigerish comeliness. She was naked except for a beplumed helmet, armbands, anklets and a girdle of colored ostrich feathers and she sprawled upon the silken cushions with her limbs thrown about in voluptuous abandon.

Even at that distance Kane could make out that her features were regal yet barbaric, haughty and imperious, yet sensual, and with a touch of ruthless cruelty about the curl of her full red lips. Kane felt his pulse quicken. This could be no other than she whose crimes had become almost mythical—Nakari of Negari, demon queen of a demon city, whose monstrous lust for blood had set half a continent shivering. At least she seemed human enough; the tales of the fearful river tribes had lent her a supernatural aspect. Kane had half expected to see a loathsome semi-human monster out of some past and demoniacal age.

The Englishman gazed, fascinated though repelled. Not even in the courts of Europe had he seen such grandeur. The chamber and all its accouterments, from the carven serpents twined about the bases of the pillars to the dimly seen dragons on the shadowy ceiling, were fashioned on a gigantic scale. The splendor was awesome — elephantine — inhumanly oversized, and almost numbing to the mind which sought to measure and conceive the magnitude thereof. To Kane it seemed that these things must have been the work of gods rather than men, for this chamber alone would dwarf most of the castles he had known in Europe.

The black people who thronged that mighty room seemed grotesquely incongruous. They no more suited their surroundings than a band of monkeys would have seemed at home in the council chambers of the English king. As Kane realized this the sinister importance of Queen Nakari dwindled. Sprawled on that august throne in the midst of the terrific glory of another age, she seemed to assume her true proportions—a spoiled, petulant child engaged in a game of make-believe and using for her sport a toy discarded by her elders. And at the same time a thought entered Kane's mind—who were these elders?

Still the child could become deadly in her game, as the Englishman soon saw.

A tall massive black came through the ranks fronting the throne, and after prostrating himself four times before it, remained on his knees, evidently waiting permission to speak. The queen's air of lazy indifference fell from her and she straightened with a quick lithe motion that reminded Kane of a leopardess springing erect. She spoke, and the words came faintly to him as he strained his faculties to hear. She spoke in a language very similar to that of the river tribes.

"Speak!"

"Great and Terrible One," said the kneeling warrior, and Kane recognized him as the chief who had first accosted him on the plateau—the chief of the guards on the cliffs, "let not

the fire of your fury consume your slave."

The young woman's eyes narrowed viciously.

"You know why you were summoned, son of a vulture?"

"Fire of Beauty, the stranger brought no gifts."

"No gifts?" she spat out the words. "What have I to do with gifts? I bade you slay all black men who came empty-handed—did I tell you to slay white men?"

"Gazelle of Negari, he came climbing the crags in the night like an assassin, with a dagger as long as a man's arm in his hand. The boulder we hurled down missed him, and we met him upon the plateau and took him to the Bridge-Across-the-Sky, where, as is the custom, we thought to slay him; for it was your word that you were weary of men who came wooing you."

"Black men, fool," she snarled; "black men!"

"Your slave did not know, Queen of Beauty. The white man fought like a mountain leopard. Two men he slew and fell with the last one into the chasm, and so he perished, Star of Negari."

"Aye," the queen's tone was venomous, "the first white man who ever came to Negari! One who might have —rise, fool!"

The man got to his feet.

"Mighty Lioness, might not this one have come seeking——"

The sentence was never completed. Even as he straightened, Nakari made a swift gesture with her hand. Two warriors plunged from the silent ranks and two spears crossed in the chief's body before he could turn. A gurgling scream burst from his lips, blood spurted high in the air and the corpse fell flatly at the foot of the great throne.

The ranks never wavered, but Kane caught the sidelong flash of strangely red eyes and the involuntary wetting of thick lips. Nakari had half risen as the spears flashed, and now she sank back, an expression of cruel satisfaction on her beautiful face and a strange brooding gleam in her scintillant eyes.

An indifferent wave of her hand and the corpse was dragged away by the heels, the dead arms trailing limply in the wide smear of blood left by the passage of the body. Kane could see other wide stains crossing the stone floor, some almost indistinct, others less dim. How many wild scenes of blood and cruel frenzy had the great stone throne-dragons looked upon with their carven eyes?

He did not doubt, now, the tales told him by the river tribes. These people were bred in rapine and horror. Their prowess had burst their brains. They lived, like some terrible beast, only to destroy. There were strange gleams behind their eyes which at times lit those eyes with upleaping flames and shadows of Hell. What had the river tribes said of these mountain people who had ravaged them for countless centuries? *That they were henchmen of death, who stalked among them, and whom they worshipped.*

Still the thought hovered in Kane's mind as he watched—who built this place, and why were negroes evidently in possession? He knew this was the work of a higher race. No black tribe had ever reached such a stage of culture as evidenced by these carvings. Yet the river tribes had spoken of no other men than those upon which he now looked.

THE Englishman tore himself away from the fascination of the barbaric scene with an effort. He had no time to waste; as long as they thought him dead, he had more chance of eluding possible guards and seeking what he had come to find. He turned and set off down the dim corridor. No plan of action offered itself to his mind and one direction was as good as another. The passage did not run

straight; it turned and twisted, following the line of the walls, Kane supposed, and found time to wonder at the evident enormous thickness of those walls. He expected at any moment to meet some guard or slave, but as the corridors continued to stretch empty before him, with the dusty floors unmarked by any footprint, he decided that either the passages were unknown to the people of Negari or else for some reason were never used.

He kept a close lookout for secret doors, and at last found one, made fast on the inner side with a rusty bolt set in a groove of the wall. This he manipulated cautiously, and presently with a creaking which seemed terrifically loud in the stillness the door swung inward. Looking out he saw no one, and stepping warily through the opening, he drew the door to behind him, noting that it assumed the part of a fantastic picture painted on the wall. He scraped a mark with his dagger at the point where he believed the hidden spring to be on the outer side, for he knew not when he might need to use the passage again.

He was in a great hall, through which ran a maze of giant pillars much like those of the throne chamber. Among them he felt like a child in some great forest, yet they gave him some slight sense of security since he believed that, gliding among them like a ghost through a jungle, he could elude the black people in spite of their craft.

He set off, choosing his direction at random and going carefully. Once he heard a mutter of voices, and leaping upon the base of a column, clung there while two black women passed directly beneath him, but besides these he encountered no one. It was an uncanny sensation, passing through this vast hall which seemed empty of human life, but in some other part of which Kane knew there might be throngs of people, hidden from sight by the pillars.

At last, after what seemed an eternity of following these monstrous mazes, he came upon a huge wall which seemed to be either a side of the hall, or a partition, and continuing along this, he saw in front of him a doorway before which two spearmen stood like black statues.

Kane, peering about the corner of a column base made out two windows high in the wall, one on each side of the door, and noting the ornate carvings which covered the walls, determined on a desperate plan. He felt it imperative that he should see what lay within that room. The fact that it was guarded suggested that the room beyond the door was either a treasure chamber or a dungeon, and he felt sure that his ultimate goal would prove to be a dungeon.

He retreated to a point out of sight of the blacks and began to scale the wall, using the deep carvings for hand and foot holds. It proved even easier than he had hoped, and having climbed to a point level with the windows, he crawled cautiously along a horizontal line, feeling like an ant on a wall.

The guards far below him never looked up, and finally he reached the nearer window and drew himself up over the sill. He looked down into a large room, empty of life, but equipped in a manner sensuous and barbaric. Silken couches and velvet cushions dotted the floor in profusion and tapestries heavy with gold work hung upon the walls. The ceiling too was worked in gold.

Strangely incongruous, crude trinkets of ivory and ironwood, unmistakably negroid in workmanship, littered the place, symbolic enough of this strange kingdom where signs of barbarism vied with a strange culture. The outer door was shut and in the wall opposite was another door, also closed.

Kane descended from the window, sliding down the edge of a tapestry as a sailor slides down a sail-rope,

and crossed the room, his feet sinking noiselessly into the deep fabric of the rug which covered the floor, and which, like all the other furnishings, seemed ancient to the point of decay.

At the door he hesitated. To step into the next room might be a desperately hazardous thing to do; should it prove to be filled with black men, his escape was cut off by the spearmen outside the other door. Still, he was used to taking all sorts of wild chances, and now, sword in hand, he flung the door open with a suddenness intended to numb with surprize for an instant any foe who might be on the other side.

Kane took a swift step within, ready for anything—then halted suddenly, struck speechless and motionless for a second. He had come thousands of miles in search of something and there before him lay the object of his search.

3. *Lilith*

"Lady of mystery, what is thy history?"
—Viereck.

A COUCH stood in the middle of the room and on its silken surface lay a woman—a woman whose skin was white and whose reddish gold hair fell about her bare shoulders. She now sprang erect, fright flooding her fine gray eyes, lips parted to utter a cry which she as suddenly checked.

"You!" she exclaimed. "How did you——?"

Solomon Kane closed the door behind him and came toward her, a rare smile on his dark face.

"You remember me, do you not, Marylin?"

The fear had already faded from her eyes even before he spoke, to be replaced by a look of incredible wonder and dazed bewilderment.

"Captain Kane! I can not understand—it seemed no one would ever come——"

She drew a small hand wearily across her white brow, swaying suddenly.

Kane caught her in his arms—she was only a girl, little more than a child—and laid her gently on the couch. There, chafing her wrists gently, he talked in a low hurried monotone, keeping an eye on the door all the time—which door, by the way, seemed to be the only entrance or egress from the room. While he talked he mechanically took in the chamber, noting that it was almost a duplicate of the outer room, as regards hangings and general furnishings.

"First," said he, "before we go into any other matters, tell me, are you closely guarded?"

"Very closely, sir," she murmured hopelessly; "I know not how you came here, but we can never escape."

"Let me tell you swiftly how I came to be here, and mayhap you will be more hopeful when I tell you of the difficulties already overcome. Lie still now, Marylin, and I will tell you how I came to seek an English heiress in the devil city of Negari.

"I killed Sir John Taferel in a duel. As to the reason, 'tis neither here nor there, but slander and a black lie lay behind it. Ere he died he confessed that he had committed a foul crime some years agone. You remember, of course, the affection cherished for you by your cousin, old Lord Hildred Taferal, Sir John's uncle. Sir John feared that the old lord, dying without issue, might leave the great Taferal estates to you.

"Years ago you disappeared and Sir John spread the rumor that you had drowned. Yet when he lay dying with my rapier through his body, he gasped out that he had kidnapped you and sold you to a Barbary rover, whom he named—a bloody pirate whose name has not been unknown on England's coasts aforetime. So I came seeking you, and a long weary trail it has been, stretching into long leagues and bitter years.

"First I sailed the seas searching El Gar, the Barbary corsair named by Sir John. I found him in the

crash and roar of an ocean battle; he died, but even as he lay dying he told me that he had sold you in turn to a merchant out of Stamboul. So to the Levant I went and there by chance came upon a Greek sailor whom the Moors had crucified on the shore for piracy. I cut him down and asked him the question I asked all men—if he had in his wanderings seen a captive English girl-child with yellow curls. I learned that he had been one of the crew of the Stamboul merchants, and that she had, on her homeward voyage, been set upon by a Portuguese slaver and sunk—this renegade Greek and the child being among the few who were taken aboard the slaver.

"This slaver then, cruising south for black ivory, had been ambushed in a small bay on the African West Coast, and of your further fate the Greek knew nothing, for he had escaped the general massacre, and taking to sea in an open boat, had been taken up by a ship of Genoese freebooters.

"To the West Coast, then, I came, on the slim chance that you still lived, and there heard among the natives that some years ago a white child had been taken from a ship whose crew had been slain, and sent inland as a part of the tribute the shore tribes paid to the upper river chiefs.

"Then all traces ceased. For months I wandered without a clue as to your whereabouts, nay, without a hint that you even lived. Then I chanced to hear among the river tribes of the demon city of Negari and the black queen who kept a white woman for a slave. I came here."

Kane's matter-of-fact tone, his unfurbished narration, gave no hint of the full meaning of that tale—of what lay behind those calm and measured words—the sea-fights and the land fights—the years of privation and heart-breaking toil, the ceaseless danger, the everlasting wandering through hostile and unknown lands, the tedious and deadening labor of ferreting out the information he wished from ignorant, sullen and unfriendly savages, black and white.

"I came here" said Kane simply, but what a world of courage and effort was symbolized by that phrase! A long red trail, black shadows and crimson shadows weaving a devil's dance—marked by flashing swords and the smoke of battle—by faltering words falling like drops of blood from the lips of dying men.

Not a consciously dramatic man, certainly, was Solomon Kane. He told his tale in the same manner in which he had overcome terrific obstacles—coldly, briefly and without heroics.

"You see, Marylin," he concluded gently, "I have not come this far and done this much, to now meet with defeat. Take heart, child. We will find a way out of this fearful place."

"Sir John took me on his saddlebow," the girl said dazedly, and speaking slowly as if her native language came strangely to her from years of unuse, as she framed in halting words an English evening of long ago: "He carried me to the seashore where a galley's boat waited, filled with fierce men, dark and mustached and having simitars, and great rings to the fingers. The captain, a Moslem with a face like a hawk, took me, I a-weeping with fear, and bore me to his galley. Yet he was kind to me in his way, I being little more than a baby, and at last sold me to a Turkish merchant, as he told you. This merchant he met off the southern coast of France, after many days of sea travel.

"This man did not use me badly, yet I feared him, for he was a man of cruel countenance and made me understand that I was to be sold to a black sultan of the Moors. However, in the Gates of Hercules his ship was set upon by a Cadiz slaver and things came about as you have said.

"The captain of the slaver believed me to be the child of some wealthy

English family and intended holding me for ransom, but in a grim darksome bay on the African coast he perished with all his men except the Greek you have mentioned, and I was taken captive by a black chieftain.

"I was terribly afraid and thought he would slay me, but he did me no harm and sent me up-country with an escort, who also bore much loot taken from the ship. This loot, together with myself, was, as you know, intended for a powerful king of the river peoples. But it never reached him, for a roving band of Negari fell upon the beach warriors and slew them all. Then I was taken to this city, and have since remained, slave to Queen Nakari.

"How I have lived through all those terrible scenes of battle and cruelty and murder, I know not."

"A providence has watched over you, child," said Kane, "the power which doth care for weak women and helpless children; which led me to you in spite of all hindrances, and which shall yet lead us forth from this place, God willing."

"My people!" she exclaimed suddenly like one awaking from a dream; "what of them?"

"All in good health and fortune, child, save that they have sorrowed for you through the long years. Nay, old Sir Hildred hath the gout and doth so swear thereat that I fear for his soul at times. Yet methinks that the sight of you, little Marylin, would mend him."

"Still, Captain Kane," said the girl, "I can not understand why you came alone."

"Your brothers would have come with me, child, but it was not sure that you lived, and I was loth that any other Taferal should die in a land far from good English soil. I rid the country of an evil Taferal—'twas but just I should restore in his place a good Taferal, if so be she still lived—I, and I alone."

This explanation Kane himself believed. He never sought to analyze his motives and he never wavered, once his mind was made up. Though he always acted on impulse, he firmly believed that all his actions were governed by cold and logical reasonings. He was a man born out of his time—a strange blending of Puritan and Cavalier, with a touch of the ancient philosopher, and more than a touch of the pagan, though the last assertion would have shocked him unspeakably. An atavist of the days of blind chivalry he was, a knight errant in the somber clothes of a fanatic. A hunger in his soul drove him on and on, an urge to right all wrongs, protect all weaker things, avenge all crimes against right and justice. Wayward and restless as the wind, he was consistent in only one respect—he was true to his ideals of justice and right. Such was Solomon Kane.

"Marylin," he now said kindly, taking her small hands in his sword-calloused fingers, "methinks you have changed greatly in the years. You were a rosy and chubby little maid when I used to dandle you on my knee in old England. Now you seem drawn and pale of face, though you are beautiful as the nymphs of the heathen books. There are haunting ghosts in your eyes, child—do they misuse you here?"

She lay back on the couch and the blood drained slowly from her already pallid features until she was deathly white. Kane bent over her, startled. Her voice came in a whisper.

"Ask me not. There are deeds better hidden in the darkness of night and forgetfulness. There are sights which blast the eyes and leave their burning mark forever on the brain. The walls of ancient cities, recked not of by men, have looked upon scenes not to be spoken of, even in whispers."

Her eyes closed wearily and Kane's troubled, somber eyes unconsciously traced the thin blue lines of her veins.

prominent against the unnatural whiteness of her skin.

"Here is some demoniacal thing," he muttered, "A mystery——"

"Aye," murmured the girl, "a mystery that was old when Egypt was young! And nameless evil more ancient than dark Babylon — that spawned in terrible black cities when the world was young and strange."

Kane frowned, troubled. At the girl's strange words he felt an eery crawling fear at the back of his brain, as if dim racial memories stirred in the eon-deep gulfs, conjuring up grim chaotic visions, illusive and nightmarish.

Suddenly Marylin sat erect, her eyes flaring wide with fright. Kane heard a door open somewhere.

"Nakari!" whispered the girl urgently. "Swift! She must not find you here! Hide quickly, and"—as Kane turned—"keep silent, whatever may chance!"

She lay back on the couch, feigning slumber as Kane crossed the room and concealed himself behind some tapestries which, hanging upon the wall, hid a niche that might have once held a statue of some sort.

He had scarcely done so when the single door of the room opened and a strange barbaric figure stood framed in it. Nakari, queen of Negari, had come to her slave.

The black woman was clad as she had been when he had seen her on the throne, and the colored armlets and anklets clanked as she closed the door behind her and came into the room. She moved with the easy sinuousness of a she-leopard and in spite of himself the watcher was struck with admiration for her lithe beauty. Yet at the same time a shudder of repulsion shook him, for her eyes gleamed with vibrant and magnetic evil, older than the world.

"Lilith!" thought Kane. "She is beautiful and terrible as Purgatory. She is Lilith—that foul, lovely woman of ancient legend."

Nakari halted by the couch, stood looking down upon her captive for a moment, then with an enigmatic smile, bent and shook her. Marylin opened her eyes, sat up, then slipped from her couch and knelt before her black mistress—an act which caused Kane to curse beneath his breath. The queen laughed and seating herself upon the couch, motioned the girl to rise, and then put an arm about her waist and drew her upon her lap. Kane watched, puzzled, while Nakari caressed the white girl in a lazy, amused manner. This might be affection, but to Kane it seemed more like a sated leopard teasing its victim. There was an air of mockery and studied cruelty about the whole affair.

"You are very soft and pretty, Mara," Nakari murmured lazily, "much prettier than the black girls who serve me. The time approaches, little one, for your nuptial. And a fairer bride has never been borne up the Black Stairs."

Marylin began to tremble and Kane thought she was going to faint. Nakari's eyes gleamed strangely beneath her long-lashed drooping lids, and her full red lips curved in a faint tantalizing smile. Her every action seemed fraught with some sinister meaning. Kane began to sweat profusely.

"Mara," said the black queen, "you are honored above all other girls, yet you are not content. Think how the girls of Negari will envy you, Mara, when the priests sing the nuptial song and the Moon of Skulls looks over the black crest of the Tower of Death. Think, little bride-of-the-Master, how many girls have given their lives to be his bride!"

And Nakari laughed in her hateful musical way, as at a rare jest. And then suddenly she stopped short. Her eyes narrowed to slits as they swept the room, and her whole body tensed. Her hand went to her girdle and

came away with a long thin dagger. Kane sighted along the barrel of his pistol, finger against the trigger. Only a natural hesitancy against shooting a woman kept him from sending death into the black heart of Nakari, for he believed that she was about to murder the girl.

Then with a lithe cat-like motion she thrust the girl from her knees and bounded back across the room, her eyes fixed with blazing intensity on the tapestry behind which Kane stood. Had those keen eyes discovered him? He quickly learned.

"Who is there?" she rapped out fiercely. "Who hides behind those hangings? I do not see you nor hear you, but I know someone is there!"

Kane remained silent. Nakari's wild beast instinct had betrayed him and he was uncertain as to what course to follow. His next actions depended on the queen.

"Mara!" Nakari's voice slashed like a whip, "who is behind those hangings? Answer me! Shall I give you a taste of the whip again?"

The girl seemed incapable of speech. She cowered where she had fallen, her beautiful eyes full of terror. Nakari, her blazing gaze never wavering, reached behind her with her free hand and gripped a cord hanging from the wall. She jerked viciously. Kane felt the tapestries whip back on either side of him and he stood revealed.

For a moment the strange tableau held—the gaunt white man in his blood-stained, tattered garments, the long pistol gripped in his right hand—across the room the black queen in her savage finery, one arm still lifted to the cord, the other hand holding the dagger in front of her—the white girl cowering on the floor.

Then Kane spoke: "Keep silent, Nakari, or you die!"

The queen seemed numbed and struck speechless by the sudden apparition. Kane stepped from among the tapestries and slowly approached her.

"You!" she found her voice at last. "You must be he of whom the guardsmen spake! There are not two other white men in Negari! They said you fell to your death! How then——"

"Silence!" Kane's voice cut in harshly on her amazed babblings; he knew that the pistol meant nothing to her, but she sensed the threat of the long blade in his left hand. "Marylin," still unconsciously speaking in the river-tribes' language, "take cords from the hangings and bind her——"

He was about the middle of the chamber now. Nakari's face had lost much of its helpless bewilderment and into her blazing eyes stole a crafty gleam. She deliberately let her dagger fall as in token of surrender, then suddenly her hands shot high above her head and gripped another thick cord. Kane heard Marylin scream but before he could take another step, before he could pull the trigger or even think, the floor fell beneath his feet and he shot down into abysmal blackness. He did not fall far and he landed on his feet; but the force of the fall sent him to his knees and even as he went down, sensing a presence in the darkness beside him, something crashed against his skull and he dropped into a yet blacker abyss of unconsciousness.

4. Dreams of Empire

"For Rome was given to rule the world
And got of it little joy—
But we, we shall enjoy the world,
The whole huge world a toy."
—Chesterton.

SLOWLY Kane drifted back from the dim realms where the unseen assailant's bludgeon had hurled him. Something hindered the motion of his hands and there was a metallic clank-

(Continued on page 857)

Haunted

by JACK BRADLEY

CITY streets are lonely in the small hours of the morning, and Officer Cardigan, just going off duty, was glad to see the big police car draw up beside him. For one thing it would mean a lift downtown which would save a long wait for a surface car. Besides the patrolman at the wheel, the car contained a captain of detectives, a police stenographer and Dr. Hughes, the stubby, explosive little police surgeon attached to his precinct. Cardigan knew they had been up at the city hospital trying to obtain a confession from "Sniffy" Callers before he died.

"Any luck?" he called out as the car stopped.

"No," the captain of detectives replied, "he wouldn't say a word. Just laughed at us. But, anyway, we—holy Mike! What's this coming?"

Cardigan turned about to follow his gaze. Down the street a man came running. He was barefoot and clad only in pajamas and he ran as if all the devils of Asia pursued him. Seeing the officers, he gave a hoarse cry and raced toward them. As he drew nearer they could see that he was a tall young man, slight of build, with dead white hair and a face that was a mask of horror and suffering. He stumbled to a halt before Cardigan

Hands

"Merciful God! If I could only forget that song of the pit!"

and thrust out his hands, close together, his throat working convulsively in an effort to speak. The officers were already climbing out of the car.

"Your handcuffs!" the man gasped when he could speak. "Your handcuffs! In the name of pity, put the good, clean steel on these damned things from the Pit! They have killed her! Killed her! Killed the woman I loved! Ah! Ah! Ah!"

He was babbling incoherently, shaking his hands before Cardigan. And Officer Cardigan, who had seen every horror that the metropolis has to show to a policeman, looked down at this man's hands and gasped. They were the hands of a strangler, those hands. Long and lean and dark they were and they looked inhumanly powerful. As Cardigan stared at them the lean cruel fingers were twisting and writhing like a nest of dark snakes.

But the thing that had caused Cardigan to exclaim was the startling impression those hands gave him. In some indefinable way he *knew* those hands were separate entities, knew

that they possessed a life of their own apart from the man who wore them! Dazedly he fumbled with his handcuffs.

"Put them on him, Cardigan." It was the cold, unemotional voice of the doctor, and as the handcuffs clicked he shook the man sharply. "Come now! The good, clean steel is on your wrists. You are safe now. Tell us what the trouble is."

The doctor had dealt with madmen before. At the touch of the cold steel, the man had quieted as if from an opiate. He looked down at his manacled hands and nodded dully.

"Yes," he said, "yes, I'll tell you. Come with me."

He climbed into the car and gave the address of an apartment house near by. When they reached the place he led them to an apartment on the ground floor. At the door of the bedroom, he stopped and pointed silently.

On the wildly disordered bed the body of a girl was lying. Her torn and mangled throat showed the manner of her death, but surely no human hands could have mangled a throat as this poor girl's throat had been mangled. The vertebræ had been snapped like a match stick and the muscles squeezed apart like a crushed orange. The doctor stared in utter disbelief at the girl's throat and then turned to look at those weird hands, now writhing and straining at the handcuffs. He stared for a moment longer at the torn throat of the girl, then drew a sheet over the poor form and turned from the room.

"Come away," he said to the man. "And now tell us how it happened."

With a strong effort, the man drew his eyes away from the grisly thing on the bed and led the way into the living-room. Each man felt a peculiar sensation of being watched, the sensation that men sometimes feel in the midst of the jungle, an instinct that is handed down from the Elder World. They glanced about and located the source of the feeling at once.

It was a grand piano. A magnificent thing of carved walnut and great powerful lines, its dark grandeur dominated the room, seemed to overshadow it. The man glanced at the thing, then drew his eyes away with a shudder. Drearily waving the others into chairs around a table, he seated himself and began.

"MY NAME is William Tchianski," he said. "I am the adopted son of Wladimir Tchianski, the pianist, and she"—he nodded toward the murdered girl in the next room—"she is my wife, Helen. We were married a week ago."

"Why did you kill her?" interrupted the captain of detectives.

"I did not kill her. I loved her, more than anything else in the world. *They* killed her!"

He laid the dark, shackled hands on the table and stared dully at the writhing, twisting fingers.

"All right," the captain answered patiently, "why did *they* kill her?"

The man smiled gently. "You think I am mad, don't you? But I am not. Emotionally torn to pieces, yes, but not mad. And now, gentlemen, if you please, I should like to begin at the beginning and tell the story in my own way. Otherwise, you would not understand me."

He moved the writhing hands beneath the table and in a dull, lifeless monotone began his story.

"I was ten years old when Tchianski took me from the orphanage where I had been left a foundling. Why he selected me instead of one of the other boys at the orphanage, I do not know, but, on the train going home, he told me his reason for adopting a son.

"He was a pianist, he said, the greatest in the world, and he wanted someone to carry on his name and fame when he died. He would give me a home and the very best musical education obtainable, and in return I was to study hard and fit myself to

carry on his fame as a pianist when he died. It was a cold matter of business; from the very first he made it clear that there was no sentiment involved, but to me, freed at last from the rigid discipline of the orphanage, it seemed a godsend of kindness. Eagerly I agreed to work with all my might to carry out my part of the bargain.

"We left the train at Turgot, a small town upstate, and late that afternoon I saw the place that was to be my home until I reached manhood. The house was more like a grim, mediæval castle than a modern home. Built entirely of stone, its age-grimed turrets and walls were almost hidden by the thick, clinging tendrils of the ivy that blanketed them. The building was located in the center of the estate and the whole was surrounded by a high stone wall.

"Tchianski began at once with my musical education. I learned rapidly enough, but after a time it began to be apparent that my patron had made a bad selection. It was simply not in me to become a master and seemingly never would be. I could play the music that was put before me, yes. I could strike the notes that were indicated, strike them as accurately as a machine, but the flaming genius that enabled Tchianski to weave a glowing thing of flame and beauty from the cold keys of a piano was in me simply non-existent.

"When Tchianski was finally forced to the conclusion that I could never become the master player that he was, he was wild with rage. Pacing up and down the room, he would listen to my mechanical rendition of a selection and curse savagely. Then he would spring to the piano, shove me aside, and under his fingers the score that I had been playing like an automaton would become a shimmering thing of flame and glory. Often I begged him to give up the hopeless task and take some one who possessed the talent I lacked. But, no, he would not admit failure.

" 'There are ways,' he would mutter. 'Even with a machine like you, there are ways. Ways which those fools out there do not know!'

"His contemptuous gesture was toward the village but I knew that it included the whole wide world of sane normal men and women. For, down in the village, I had heard strange tales of this man. Tales of ghostly lights that had flickered through the gloomy old castle in the small hours of the night. Tales of dreadful orgies, of wild, evil chants, faintly heard, whispers of the Black Mass. Dreadful furtive tales that I had been too young to understand and had refused to believe when I grew old enough to understand.

"But as the years rolled by, I was forced to believe them. There were rooms in the house which I was sternly forbidden to enter. At times I was summarily ordered to pack a bag and leave the place for a specified length of time. And on a few very rare occasions I had caught glimpses of terrible books in Tchianski's study. As I grew into the understanding that comes with manhood, there could no longer be any doubt: this man who had taken me for his own was a worshipper of Satan, a priest of the Prince of Darkness. Oddly enough, I attached little importance to this when I was certain of the truth. It was to me very disgusting and suggestive of insanity, but nothing more.

"So the years rolled by until I reached manhood; then Tchianski died. I was in New York City at the time. There was no warning, merely a telegram commanding me to return at once. When I reached home he was seated in an armchair, fully dressed, apparently in the best of health. He gave me no word of greeting, only motioned me to a chair and broke the news without preamble.

"'William,' he said, 'I am about to die. I have just six hours more to live and I have something to say before I go. No, no, do not interrupt. I know what you are going to say—a doctor and all the rest of the customary rigmarole. But a doctor could not help me. He could not even find anything the matter with me. No, it is to discuss your future, not mine, that I have called you. I want to know what you plan to do with your life when I am gone. I have made my will in your favor and there is plenty for you to finish your musical education under the best masters of Europe, if you will go on. That is what I want to know, if you intend to go on. There never was any pretense of affection between us and there will be none now. I want no sobbing vows. I only want a candid statement of your intentions. That is all.'

"The great, dark head was held coldly erect and those blazing eyes were boring into my brain, searching out every hidden corner.

"'You know the answer, sir,' I told him. 'When you took me from that orphanage, we made a certain bargain: that in exchange for your care of me, I was to study and fit myself to carry on your name as a pianist when you died. Every day of my life since that time, I have done my best to carry out my part of that bargain, and if you are really near to death, you can rest assured that I shall do my best in the future as I have in the past. But you know that I have no talent for music and I can not promise success. I can only promise to do my best.'

"Tchianski leaned forward in his chair and stared tensely into my eyes for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was very low and tense.

"'Listen to me, William. You have heard strange tales of me down there in the village. Tales of dread rituals. Tales of a power that ordinary men do not possess. Tales that you may or may not have believed. *But those tales are true, William!* I do possess those powers and I know too much to be balked of my plans by what those fools call death. Alone, you would never be anything but an automaton, but you will not be alone. Oh, no, you will not be alone. Far from it. Listen to me, boy!

"'You know my wishes. Obey them and I will send these hands of mine back from the grave to play for you. *Refuse, and by the power of the Pit I will send these same hands back from the grave to strangle you!*'

"He lifted his hands—*these* hands, gentlemen — and shook them before my eyes. For months they haunted me. Those dark, cruel hands, with their lean, writhing fingers.

"WHEN I entered his study the next morning, I found him dead. He was seated in his armchair, sternly erect, gazing straight ahead as one who waits the coming of an expected messenger. All of his books and other objects dealing with Satanism had been destroyed, and in a neat pile at his side lay all of his business papers, including his will, ready for me. On the top of the pile lay a paper containing the directions for his burial. To my surprize, there was nothing particularly objectionable in these directions. He merely stated that 'as certain events made it impossible for him to be buried by members of his own faith, he was to be buried without aid of clergy and with as little publicity as possible.'

"When his attorney called the next day to help me straighten out his affairs, I learned with a shock that it would be utterly impossible for me to carry out his plans as I had meant to do; for the fortune he left me consisted of mining stock as worthless as so much waste paper. Like many men of genius, he had no more business acumen than a child. I had to sell the house and furniture to meet his debts

and pay the funeral expenses. When it was over, I had little more than the clothes upon my back with which to face the world. And his piano. I kept that, of course.

"There was only one thing to do. Go to work at once and, when I had sufficient money saved, to take up my musical studies again, as he had wished. Almost immediately I obtained a position with the company of which I am now an officer. I loved the work and plunged into it wholeheartedly. Twelve and sixteen hours a day I was working, and I was making wonderful progress. But there was no time for anything but work, and for two years his piano sat there untouched.

"And then I met Helen."

The man paused wearily, and Cardigan held a glass of water to his lips. The man drank and then went on with his story, speaking in the same dull, lifeless monotone.

"I had been sent by my firm to show her some property about which she had inquired, and it was, with me, a case of love at first sight. I was completely captivated by this lovely, gentle girl and I was soon calling upon her regularly. She was a concert pianist, and already she was beginning to make a name for herself. Gradually I told her something of my early life. I did not tell her of my patron's Satan-worship nor of his gruesome dying threat but I did tell her of how he had taken me from an orphanage and how I expected to take up the study of music as soon as I had money enough. When I told her of Tchianski's piano and how it had sat there untouched for two years, she expressed a wish to see the instrument, and one day, at the termination of a shopping tour, I took her to my apartment to see the piano of the great Tchianski.

"That was less than a month ago, but it seems a thousand years. We were so happy, then, like two laughing children, as I took her hand and led her up to that diabolical piano. She seated herself and played a selection she had brought with her. As her dainty fingers rippled up and down the keyboard, that damnable thing seemed to stir itself like some slimy dragon slowly coming to life. I could *feel* the thing, just as you gentlemen can, do doubt, feel it now.

"But Helen seemed to notice nothing unusual. Or perhaps she was too much absorbed in the music she was playing—a new opera, a prison song—and under her trained fingers the music swelled up into a sobbing song of heartbreak and passion. When she had finished she arose and laughingly insisted that it was my turn now.

"Just why I seated myself at the piano, I do not know. Certainly I should never, in my normal state, have made myself ridiculous by attempting that complicated score after two years without practise. But something seemed to draw me toward that unholy piano. Like a man in a daze I seated myself and aimlessly dropped my hands on the keyboard.

"Then something in me snapped and I was playing; or rather my hands were playing, for I was conscious of not one note of that music! I was staring dully at the score and it registered in my brain as nothing more than a white blur. Like a man in a trance, I sat there and my fingers were flying back and forth across the keyboard like demons of hell, suddenly released.

"Beneath those flying fingers the music rose up and up, into a wailing thing of glory. Helen had played the score with all the consummate skill of an artist, but her rendition had been pale and colorless beside this mad thing that was being woven beneath my fingers.

"When I had finished, there were tears in Helen's eyes and she poured out a flood of eager questions—questions to which I had no answer, for I was as puzzled as she. Not for a

moment would I believe that my patron had really been able to keep his promise to send his hands back from the grave to play for me; that savored too much of mediæval superstition. Yet I could think of no other reasonable explanation. I made some fumbling answer to Helen's questions and took her home as soon as possible.

"I had no sleep that night—had I but known it, that night was the forerunner of so many other nights when I was not to sleep—but I did decide upon the only sensible course to be taken. I would tell Helen the things I had not told her before, and together we would find a solution to the mystery if there was one to be found.

"When I called upon Helen the next evening, I told her the things I had not cared to mention before. I told her of my patron's Satan-worship and of the gruesome threat he had made before dying. Then I told her of how I had played that music, the evening before, without being conscious of a note of it.

"When I had finished my story she was as puzzled as I. Like myself, she would not believe that Tchianski actually possessed the power to do the thing he had threatened, but, like myself, she could think of no other explanation of what had happened. The best that she could do was to suggest that I experiment by playing the piano as much as possible and trust to time to solve the mystery.

"And so began what was surely the strangest test ever undertaken by two people. Night after night I sat before that damnable piano and played while Helen sat enraptured listening to the wild glories that my fingers evoked without direction from my mind. I tried to play upon other pianos and found that upon them my hands would not play with the same ease.

"So it was that each night I came back to that Satanic piano and Helen sat, tense, listening to those glorious, hell-born symphonies. Night after night I played, and day after day my contacts with the sane, normal people of the business world seemed more and more like a dream. Only the nighttime seemed real, when I could sit before that piano and listen to my hands weave those crashing symphonies from the Pit. Then, so suddenly that it was like a crashing blow to a man stumbling through a dark room, I discovered the truth!

"From the first night at the piano, it had seemed to me that my hands were growing longer and darker. I had thought it merely a hallucination born of the emotional stress under which I was laboring, and it was more to quiet my own fears than in any real question that I made a careful measurement of them. When I measured them again, my brain sickened in horror. There could be no doubting the cold figures before me. My hands were rapidly growing longer and already they were much darker.

"That night when I seated myself at the piano I received the final confirmation, if any had been needed. No sooner was I seated than my hands fairly leaped upon the keys. But it was no mere riot of song that was being played by those hands now. It was a message that was being told to me by the singing keys, a message that I could understand as plainly as the spoken word—the voice of the Satanist, Tchianski, exulting that at last I knew, demanding that I yield my will to his and become his creature.

"If I would obey—the singing keys whispered to me a tale of stately glory—of fame—the adulation of beautiful women — gold — a power that was greater than that of man—all these things would be mine if I would obey.

"If I refused—the music changed

its joyous tempo. It breathed terrible threats—lewd hints of forgotten arts—of things that sane men should never know. There were secrets, the singing keys whispered, dread secrets of the Pit, and if a man were willing to pay the price for those secrets, he could reach back—even through the Veil, he could reach back—to strike at those who refused to obey his will.

"I remember screaming and straining to jerk my hands away from the keyboard — straining with all my might as they clung to the keys like quicksand. Then everything went black before me. For the first time in my life, I had fainted.

"WHEN I had regained consciousness, Helen was bending over me frantic with fear, terrified as much by that unholy music as by my fainting. For while she had not understood as clearly as I the message those keys had whispered, she had understood their evil import.

"When I told Helen that there could no longer be any doubt that Tchianski had been able to keep his promise—that the hands upon my wrists were his, not mine—she nodded in agreement.

"'Yes, I have really been sure of it for days now, and so have you, I am sure. And there is only one thing to do. You must never touch a piano again, Billy. You could be the greatest pianist in the world, but it would be at the price of your soul and that is a price too great to pay. No matter what promise you made to him, you can break it with honor when your soul is the price of its fulfilment. Once you have been away from the piano for a while, he will lose whatever hold he has upon you. Of that I am sure.'

"'Yes,' I replied, 'I feel that I can honorably break my promise after this. And I am sure that he knows our decision. But if he is here, listening to us, it is only just that I should go to the piano one more time to hear his final word. And after tonight, I shall never touch a piano again. Somehow, I hope that he will understand and forgive me.'

"With Helen's anxious eyes upon me, I walked to the piano and seated myself. The instant that I touched the keys there was a wild jangle of sound from the piano. Then the dark hands were racing up and down the keys like mad beasts, pouring out a wild, incoherent scream of hate! hate! hate!

"Helen shrieked and leaped to my side, trying to tear my hands from the keyboard. I added my strength to hers but we were as helpless as two children in the grip of a giant. On and on that mad song of hate played, gradually changing its tone. It was lower now, low and tense like the snarl of a cornered beast. Over and over the keys whispered that snarling tale of a hate that would never die, never relent, until its victim had been drawn through the Veil to it. Lower and lower the music sank until it dared to whisper that even after death there would be a ghastly vengeance out there in the dark. Suddenly I realized with a cry of horror that this devil's tale of hate and vengeance was not for me alone—that it was directed at the woman I loved as much as at myself. For the second time that evening, I fainted.

"This time, when I regained consciousness, there was no Helen bending over me. She, too, had understood that low, snarling threat and had fainted. When I saw her pale, lovely face before me and realized the danger she had faced with me, I gave silent thanks that I had not yet declared my love. At least I could spare her. I would at once drop out of her life, and with me would go, I thought, the menace of this thing from the Pit.

"When I had brought her back to consciousness, I told her of my deci-

sion. And then I learned the full depths of a gentle woman's love.

"She looked at me tenderly for a moment then. 'You've loved me for a long time, now, haven't you, Billy?' she asked.

"There was no blush on her face as she spoke, no false modesty of drooping head, only a great, tender love. I could only nod, dumbly.

" 'I know,' she continued. 'I have known for a long time, now. And I've loved you even longer. Don't you see, beloved, that no matter what he can do to us it will not be so hard to bear as separation would be? No, Billy, we will fight this thing together, and if he wins here, we will go out there in the dark to face him —still together. *And in the end we will win, beloved, for love is the greatest power in the universe. No matter what weapons he has, they will not overcome such love as ours.*'

"We sat there for a long time, huddled in each other's arms, like two frightened children, comforting each other, and then I took her home.

"When I returned home I was almost calm, and happier than I had been for days. No matter what horror was in store for me, I should not have to face it alone. There was a great flood of love in my heart for this gentle, loving girl who was facing death and worse than death for love of me, and the memory of her warm lips on mine was like a benediction. For the first time in many weary nights, I fell asleep as soon as I retired.

"I DO not know how long I slept, but suddenly I was aware that my bedroom was filled with a clammy cold, a chill draft that seemed to bear the stench of the charnel-house. Above my head hovered a shadow that was dimly visible as being darker than the rest of the room. And from the shadow glared the burning eyes of Tchianski, the Satanist! Closer and closer to me came the dreadful eyes, and now I could see the cruel strangler hands below them. Then a voice sounded, a voice that was low and tense—like that music I had played a few hours ago.

" 'Since you have broken your vow, William, I have returned to keep mine.'

"Steadily the cruel hands moved closer to my throat, closer and yet closer as I desperately struggled to rise and throw myself out of their path. It was like that phenomenon known as a dream within a dream, where a sleeper in the throes of a horrible nightmare struggles to awaken himself.

"Mad with horror, I watched—I felt—those damnable hands creep up my chest—up—up, until I felt them fasten about my throat, felt my breath cut off and dimly felt my own desperate struggle to throw off those strangling hands. It seemed that I went through long eons of torture before I awoke—to find my hands clutched about my throat in a strangling hold that left great blue marks upon my throat for days. My hands! *His* hands!

"Of what followed, I have no clear recollection. I have fragmentary memories of running through the streets, babbling incoherent things as I ran. Somehow, I found myself battering at the door of Helen's apartment, and I can remember her terrified scream when she opened the door and saw me, but the rest of the night was only a nightmare memory of crouching in her arms trying to ward off the memory of those dreadful hands. When morning came she brought a mirror to me. Overnight, my hair had turned white and my face was lined with the horror I had experienced.

" 'And now,' she said quietly, 'we are going to be married at once. Never again, beloved, will you face those horror-filled nights alone. Always, hereafter, you will have me by your side to help you in this dreadful fight.'

"And I yielded. There is no excuse I can offer for what I did. At first, of course, I begged her to leave me to face the thing alone. I even told her that I would leave the city at once in order to move the danger away from her. But in the end, I yielded. For one thing, I was sure that she was marked for vengeance as well as I, by that thing from the Pit; that, even if I fled, she would eventually face it, and it were better that we face it together. But it was more than a mere matter of reasoning. It was her calm and oft-reiterated statement that 'no matter what he can do to us, it will not be so hard to bear as separation.' Love like ours does not often come to men. That day we slipped over into Connecticut and were quietly married. She packed a few things in a bag and we came to my apartment to live."

The man shifted warily in his chair. Cardigan brought him another glass of water. Then he went on, speaking more rapidly as if anxious to be done with his story.

"THAT was a week ago, gentlemen. A week, but it seems like a lifetime in hell. A week without sleep, gentlemen. Do you know what it means to live for a week without the blessed release of sleep? To fight with all your might against sleep, knowing that it would bring death? Time and again I would drift into slumber and awake to find Helen tugging desperately at a pair of dark hands that were at my throat—hands that were hands from the Pit though they were attached to my wrists. Outside, on the street, people were passing—sane, normal people going about the prosy, everyday round of life, and inside we crouched in each other's arms like two children afraid of the dark.

"It will, no doubt, seem strange to you that we did nothing but cower there and wait—that we availed ourselves of none of the aids of modern civilization. But, somehow, we knew that it would be useless, that nothing could be done unless we could prove our will stronger than his. Oh, yes, we talked of various things. Travel. A doctor. But we knew that it would only mean death in some madhouse, and death was not the worst thing we feared now. Already we were beginning to plan our real fight—our fight against him out there in the dark, when we had passed through the Veil.

"And so the week dragged slowly through, with its nights of horror and its days of dreadful waiting. Yesterday I received a letter from the management of the Turgot Cemetery where Tchianski was buried. The cemetery is being moved to make way for a dam, and the letter was to notify me that his grave would be opened today. It started a new train of thought in my mind. Perhaps if I went there and obtained his remains and burned them to ashes, it would help in our fight against him. As I thought the matter over, I grew almost hopeful. Perhaps I could even snatch an hour or so of sleep while she watched over me.

"And when I awoke again I was seated at the piano and playing!

"Merciful God! If I could only forget that Song of the Pit that those damned hands were playing! It was a wild pæan of—triumph! A devil's jubilee, a dirge played in utter, joyous syncopation. A chant of all the demons of hell as they chanted their devilish tales in my ears. And over it all *his* voice shouting a hellish song of victory in my suddenly comprehending ears! God! how his wild laughter rang out under those flying fingers! How gleefully the singing keys chuckled and whispered their grisly tale to me—of how those evil hands had waited—waited patiently

(Continued on page 863)

The EMPTY ROAD

by WALLACE WEST

"Their scarlet lips seemed begging for love."

STANLEY WARDEN'S convalescence was peculiar in that he seemed to know in advance just how soon he would recover; when he would leave the hospital for his home and how soon he would be back at the office.

He had regained consciousness after an operation which had removed an abscess from the base of his brain with a feeling similar to that experienced when one steps from a dark alley into a brightly lighted street and is doubtful which way to turn.

During the days which followed it was borne upon him irresistibly that in those far places to which an anesthetic had swept him he had gained the ability to remember the future as well as the past.

As he gained strength this uncanny foreknowledge annoyed him more and more. It didn't puzzle him. For some reason it seemed quite natural that he should see his life unrolling far before him. But it took all the flavor from existence.

The endearments which his mother and Jerry Sanders, his fiancée, showered upon him when he returned to his apartment, the things he had to eat, even the weather and the news in the papers—all were as a twice-told tale long before they reached him.

He fancied himself as an unending series of figures, each one step ahead of the last, along which his soul—the spark which actually was alive—passed without variation, like a

beam of light traveling along a bas-relief in some old gallery.

Only his thoughts seemed free. He never could tell what he would be thinking in the future, but in spite of this his acts were as fixed by the law of cause and effect as though they had been graven in stone ages before.

He became more and more irked by the predestined nature of everything surrounding him. Forcing himself to the utmost against bonds which gripped him, he tried little acts of rebellion—knocked over an inkwell that according to his memory of coming events should have remained untouched—chose a different suit from the one in which he had seen himself attired.

Oddly enough he found it entirely possible to do these unimportant things, but afterward he would feel a faint, cold chill pass over him, as though he had dislodged a tiny stone in the abutment of the university which might topple the whole structure to ruin.

With more important acts, rebellion was much more difficult and painful. For instance, he tried to stay away from the office on the day when, according to the ordinary course of events, he would have returned to work, and when, in fact, he clearly saw himself taking his accustomed place at his mahogany desk.

For a few minutes he felt brave and daring, as though he were defying the laws of nature successfully. Then, though he strove to dally over his breakfast tray, the pull of some compelling power seemed dragging him to his feet.

Cursing, he clung to the arms of his chair, but something more powerful than himself was urging him to don clothes and hurry downtown. It wasn't a physical pressure, he realized—rather a mental urge, which, like the force that propels a drug addict to his narcotic, was driving him to do something—driving him so powerfully that at last his will-power crumbled.

Gritting his teeth in fury he hurried into his clothing, ordered a taxi and arrived at his office at the very minute when he had seen himself entering the door.

As the weeks passed Stanley became more and more engrossed in experimenting with his new-found ability, at once fascinating and brutally terrifying.

Was there no such thing as a free soul? Were all beings chained to the law of cause and effect as the Hindoos pictured mankind chained to the wheel of life, revolving over and over along the same path until Nirvana, or forgetfulness, put an end to the farce?

He made deeper excursions into his "memories", as he could not help but call them.

He saw himself married to this dark-haired, dark-eyed Jerry whom he loved. He saw himself a successful business man, a proud father, a pillar of the church; saw his children wed, and waited with baited breath for news of the coming of his first grandchild.

A happy life, he could not but admit. There were sorrows and worries, of course, but luck and hard work and right dealing seemed always to bring sunshine out of the clouds.

Delving still deeper he came to the end—even unto his death—and he could envision that as plainly as if it were tomorrow. He felt himself lying on his bed—tired, but not in pain. He saw the faces of children and grandchildren, and a worn, sweet likeness of Jerry bending over him.

He felt his breath drawing shorter, a strange numbness creeping over his body—and that was all.

Beyond that curtain he could not go, although more clearly than ever before he felt there was something

beyond that—something. Always he breathed a prayer of relief that that had been spared him—that if there were other lives as fixed as this he could not know it.

Coming out of such a revery as this he would find himself filled with bitterness. Often such spells would come upon him while he was sitting before his grate fire while Jerry, who almost made her home at the apartment since his illness, and his mother, were in the kitchen concocting a supper to tempt his jaundiced appetite.

Once, in the access of his rage he hurled a poker into the dancing flames in which he had seen his future mocking him, and was cursing savagely when he caught a glimpse of the startled faces of the two women watching him from the kitchen.

And slowly he began to form an intense disgust for Jerry's gay, high-spirited way of looking at life; for the carefree manner in which she looked fate in the eye and made a "snoot", as she called it.

As she said mockingly one day when he felt particularly blue: "Why grouch, Stan? You know the old poem which the ghost recited as it sat on the tombstone:

> Life is a joke and all things show it.
> Once I thought so; now I know it.

"Smile, dearest," she continued, half plaintive, half laughing, as she perched on his knees before the fire and experimented with his nose and ruffled up his eyebrows. "You're too serious since you've been ill. You take life too soberly. Heavens! One would think you had the weight of the world on your shoulders! Remember, we don't know what's going to happen to us, and we should squeeze joy out of every happy moment we have, so that in case a rainy day comes we'll have some left over."

She kissed him then, and he held her tight and loved her. But the mood of playfulness she inspired passed and once more he found himself face to face with an unchanging fate.

If he only dared tell her—dared talk about it. But he knew she would think him feverish, and humor him—or mad, and be frightened at him.

So he kept silent and felt a greater and greater irritation at her gayety and devil-may-care attitude.

Her little acts of kindness began to infuriate him. Particularly he detested her habit of filling the room with flowers when she came. Their aroma oppressed him. Their massed blooms seemed to menace him.

Perhaps, he thought, this might be explained by the fact that once when a boy of five he had wandered into the conservatory at an uncle's house, and knocked down a shelf of blooming roses. Buried under the mixture of soil and bruised blooms he had almost suffocated before being rescued by a gardener.

This experience always had haunted him like a nightmare, and now after his illness it increased, and was made more annoying by Jerry's persistence in bringing in great loads of blooms. He hated to hurt her feelings by forbidding this, but raged inwardly.

Gradually a plan of rebellion against the whole scheme of things as they are began forming in his super-sensitive mind. It was an evil plan, he knew, and yet so great had the pressure become that he did not care.

Now, he reasoned, if it had been possible for him to knock over the inkwell, and dress in the wrong suit of clothes, and see a different show, why should it not be possible for him to break the chain entirely and escape into a realm where he no longer was at the mercy of the powers that be?

He remembered the day when he fought against going to the office, but his hatred of forces which bound him had grown so great that he was

blindly determined to make another effort.

A complete break it must be, he knew, if he were to escape. What should it be and how could it be accomplished so that like Ulysses, who was bound to the mast so that he might hear the Sirens and yet not succumb to their wiles, he, Stanley Warden, might be borne away in spite of his urge to fulfil his destiny?

The word "mast" decided him. A boat, of course, which would bear him away from the daily routine so he could not return. And the greatest break possible in the chain? A break with Jerry!

The thought stunned him. Yet, now that he had thought it over, that was the only way. A lesser break—such as quitting his job, easily could be mended, like a broken thread in a loom, and the cloth would scarcely show it.

But if he left Jerry for ever! There could be no return.

Slowly, during the long nights when he could not sleep and sat in slippers and lounging-robe before the fire staring into the flames he began composing a letter.

Should it be merely: "I have found I do not love you"? or "I love another"? or simply "You bore me to tears"? The latter, he decided, would be the most final. Jerry might think he was indulging his "weird humor" if he wrote the former, but "You bore me"—that she would never forgive.

So he wrote it. A neat little note, scorching and bitter, and, though he did not know it, filled with the agony of his too-enlightened soul.

Then, on a day when he happened to be passing near a steamship ticket office, he dashed inside and stammeringly asked for a ticket to London.

Strong hands seemed gripping him by the shoulders, trying to force him out the door and into the regular routine of life, which for a moment he had escaped. Rubber bands seemed clogging his arms as he reached for his billfold to pay for the ticket.

Yet he succeeded, and, as the amazed clerk stared after this madman, he snatched the pasteboards, dashed out of the door, and after three blocks of frenzied walking caught up with that—that other self, and merged again into the everyday current of events.

As his sailing date approached he became more and more tender toward Jerry, trying in some dim way to make up for the hurt he must do her; for the horror and confusion into which he must throw her when she too would find the world of cause and effect tumbling about her, and a world of chance in its place. For of course the chain of her life—and of how many others—would be disrupted if his plan succeeded and he withdrew from his accustomed round. It would be as if a tiny but essential cog in a vast machine had rebelled against its duty.

Strangely he felt no great pity. He had become as a scientist, pushing pawns about a board. He had become—he scarcely dared think of it—in some way a god, operating outside the laws of the universe. Now that he had achieved that attitude he felt no fear of failure.

TOMORROW he sailed. Everything was arranged. His valises were packed. His mother had returned to her home. No one would know.

Midnight approached. He could not sleep.

> "Like one, that on a lonesome road
> Doth walk in fear and dread,
> And having once turned round, walks on,
> And turns no more his head."

He stumbled into his clothes and paced back and forth across the living-room. The *Celtic* sailed at 7 a. m. Beyond was darkness. He could not see. The chain was snapped and he

was walking down that lonely road shivering as with the ague:

"Because he knows a frightened fiend
Doth close behind him tread."

He pulled on his topcoat and hurried out into the street. The compulsion which had governed him so long seemed slackening. He moved without that terrible dragging which had at first encumbered his rebellion. And oddly enough he felt all at once frightened and lost and immeasurably lonely.

He posted the note to Jerry, and watched idly as the last mailman unlocked the box and slipped it into his pouch. That would mean Jerry would receive it next morning. At that time he would be far out on the Atlantic. The die was cast.

He turned down the street, shivering slightly in the raw, damp atmosphere of an early spring night. He would take a long walk and steady his nerves. God! He wished he had a drink.

A gentle touch on his elbow caused him to whirl in a sweat of terror. He had been sure there was no one nearer than the retreating mail truck. But it was only a little, wizened man in the red livery of a butler.

"Beg pardon, but are you Stanley Warden?" this one asked.

"Why, yes," he replied, lighting a cigarette with hands that shook ever so slightly. "What can I do for you?"

"My master, John Brown, who lives in the brownstone house across the street, is having a dinner party for some of his friends," the little man said with an accent faintly furred by some queer foreign phraseology. "One of the guests has been detained, and Mr. Brown has a superstition against sitting down with an empty chair at table. He asked that I find another guest, and since I know you by sight I thought perhaps——"

His voice trailed off. Stanley had a queer notion that he was being watched by other eyes. Suddenly he noticed that the butler was a hunchback—that his head was set at a queer thrusting angle. That accounted for his shortness of stature.

"Why, yes," Stanley laughed, a trifle discordantly. "I've nothing to do until dawn and I can't sleep. I'd be glad to join the party. Lead on, Macduff."

Without a word the butler turned and preceded him quickly across the street and into an imposing entrance. Odd, Warden thought. He never had noticed the sumptuousness of the place. It always had appeared to be a gone-to-seed residence of the Gay Nineties. But now!

THE hunchback bowed him into a lofty dining-room and vanished. A hasty glance assured Stanley that the place was really magnificent. That must be a real Gobelin tapestry, and the mold of the Parthenon still seemed to cling about those marbles. . . .

His host was advancing with hands outstretched.

"So glad you could come, Mr. Warden," he smiled, detaching himself from a group of guests and approaching with a slightly halting gait. "Never does to have an empty chair at table."

Warden found himself looking into a fathomless pair of jet eyes and gripping a long, sinewy hand that felt strangely warm and dry. As they returned to the table he tried to determine, without appearing rude, just what was the matter with his host's feet, but the latter walked slightly behind him with a hand on his elbow.

It was a strange company, that, grouped about the long table, which glimmered with linen and silver. Stanley noticed with a start that there were but eleven guests besides himself. His was the thirteenth chair.

A few of them he recognized as he was introduced: Solomon Levy, the broker, who was reputed to have made close to a billion on the stock market that season; Arnold Brutus, the criminal lawyer, who never had lost a case; Stephen Mathy, the author, who had been involved in an unsavory murder-suicide scandal not six months ago, but who had been pronounced blameless by a jury.

Others puzzled him. Somehow they were out of drawing, odd, a little repulsive. And all peered at him with an interest which seemed warmer than should have greeted a casual guest.

But the dinner, late though it was, was magnificent: food such as he never had dreamed of; wines that prohibition's fingers never had clutched; liquors like the breath of Venus.

He succumbed entirely to the spell and basked for an hour in the comfort and well-being which it invoked.

He was startled, when, after the last dish had been cleared away, his host arose abruptly, glass in hand.

"Here's to the World of Chance," Brown cried without preamble.

The hall suddenly re-echoed with the shout as other guests took it up.

Stanley found himself on his feet with the rest, but he was strangely shaken as he saw the tight-lipped faces around him. Suddenly the guests had changed from jovial good fellows into an army, deadly and ready for battle. The hawk nose of Levy protruded like that of a bird of prey. The long yellow fingers of Mathy were writhing like snakes over the back of his chair. A tall, skinny, crooked man at the end of the table set up a neighing whinny of laughter that made his flesh creep.

Brown was looking directly at him as all remained standing, their glasses drained.

"I do not want you to think, Stan," he said familiarly, "that your coming here tonight was accidental. It was caused"—he paused and laughed lightly, his long white teeth showing—"caused," he repeated, "what a queer word!—it was ordered by me as a direct insult to the powers that be. We knew of your rebellion. That's why you felt the slackening of the pressure upon you lately."

Without warning a bay of laughter went up from the eleven guests, who seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely.

Abruptly the host crossed to the side of the room, drew down an ornamental rapier which had been crossed with its mate above a mantel and stalked to a great cobweb, which, strangely enough, was gently swaying between two tapestries at one corner of the otherwise immaculate room.

"Look," he ordered sharply. "You are a novice. This will be your initiation. This represents the world of cause and effect. He pointed to the gleaming strands which met each other with geometric precision. The spider that meshed this——" Brown stood silent a moment.

"Cause and effect!" he continued after an interval. "Warden, you stand in the presence of a company of the free lances of the universe who no longer are bound by cause and effect, even as you no longer are bound."

A snarling cheer greeted his words.

"Time was," continued his host when the noise had subsided, "time was when the universe was as closely knit as this tapestry—when every joint fitted as neatly as do the meshes of this web. But," with the point of the rapier he tore a long, ragged slit in the shimmering network, "that has passed. You stand in the presence of those who are tearing at the web of things as they are; who are no longer bound; who are striving to create a world of chance.

"You may have thought," he continued, "that you alone could read

the future. All those about you could do so at one time. Could, I say, for they too have broken the chain, and for them now there is no future. All is the present.

"Levy, here, carves his own way, like this," and Brown slashed another hole in the web. "Mathy, too, does his bit. Aviglon, that tall, skinny chap, is ripping at the laws of government. Each in his own way is breaking down, tearing apart this foolish web which is life as ordinary people know it.

"Strand by strand," he illustrated neatly with the point of the weapon, "we are gnawing at the foundations of things. Look at your web now—torn and shattered. A few more recruits, a few more blows and——" With a long sweep of the sword he brought the entire web to the floor and trampled it under foot.

"You do not believe," he continued gently. "No wonder. But you will. Why, our first venture was a masterpiece. What was it? The World War, of course! Did you not realize it? Did you not at the time stand in amaze that a poor fool's bullet should plunge the world into madness?

"Ah, but it was cleverly done," he bowed to Levy. "So gently done. A man made mad conveniently — a statesman stricken with apoplexy—a king with a bad case of gastritis—a bankrupt baron trying to recoup his fortune—a little twist here and there—a faint change in the ordinary current of life—and behold——"

There was no doubting this dynamic individual. Stanley found himself still standing, half-filled glass in hand, although the others had sat down long ago.

"And now?" he breathed.

"Now? Look about you. Frenzied speculation — nations at bay and armed to the teeth—intrigue—racketeering. The time is about ripe. A few more willing, strong hands such as yours and we will give the push which will send this little civilization toppling into oblivion. After that we will be lords of creation in a world ruled only by ourselves."

"But how will you rule?" puzzled the neophyte. "With the laws of the world toppled, with what will you control it? Will it not crumble into dust about you?"

"We will rule through will-power," snapped his host. "Look, it is simple. I will demonstrate."

He picked up a goblet of wine and held it against the light so that it threw amber shadows across the snowy cloth.

And, as Stanley stared—it vanished!

"Try it," said Brown. "I will help you. It's difficult at first."

Stanley held up his glass, still warm from his hand.

"Will it to vanish," whispered Brown.

As the younger man concentrated on the bright object, wheels and cogs in his mind seemed to mesh for the first time. He likened the sensation to that felt by a paralytic, who after years of immobility finds that he can once more move his arms.

And slowly the glass faded, gleamed iridescently a moment like a fairy bubble—and was gone.

"Simple," laughed Brown, evidently elated. "The Rosicrucians knew the trick long ago, but didn't apply it.

"Look," he continued. "I will show you something more worth while. Don't cross your will with mine or disaster may result. Just let yourself go as if you were taking ether."

Brown leaned forward with his hands on the table and smiled. As he did so the walls about them melted away. With such suddenness that there was no feeling of movement the whole table with its twelve guests was transported to an elevation of several thousand feet. Below them

(Continued on page 854)

In the Borderland

by · PEDRO · DIAZ

"Benson prepared to open the skull. The poor wraith's hands came up to ward off the saw."

AMONG the effects of one Joe White, a beachcomber fisherman of Apalache Inlet, Florida, was found the following papers, together with others that fairly assured of the correctness of his identity. As county prosecutor they were given into my custody. Since their publication at that time might have reflected seriously upon certain Northern state officials, I suppressed them. However, since that date those most concerned have died, and I am giving to the world what is perhaps the oddest and most terrible experience ever recorded by a living being. It will be given in the words of its chief actor:

I AM known as Joe White. That is not my real name. Most folks have wondered why I stay here, and where the money that keeps me comes from. I am nothing if not accommodating. So, since now I am gone beyond their bothering, I will tell the curious the whole tale. Not that they will believe it, but it is the unvarnished truth none the less.

If you remember back some ten years ago you will remember the Shelton murder case. You will remember that old Granny Shelton was tortured, burned, and finally strangled. All the evidence pointed to two people, Joseph Shelton, her nephew, and Slippery Mike Donelson, with whom young Shelton had been seen in company. You will remember that they were convicted after a sensational trial, sentenced to the chair, and were in fact executed the following February. Well, I am Joe Shelton.

Mike and I did the job. I was desperate for money, and old granny, who was as tight with me as she was generous to others, refused it to me. I was a weak young fool, and Slippery Mike persuaded me that the old woman would scare. Well, she didn't. Before I realized it Mike had so tortured her that it would have meant a long sentence at the least. So we strangled her, stole what was in the house and left. You know most of the rest until the night of February 19th.

They posted the death watch on me on February 17th. I was pretty nervous, but kept up well. I'll admit it was a test of nerve when the lights winked early in February for George Nelson, and again the Friday before my date when the negro boy, Wilky Boone, sat in the chair.

I had seen my attorney, John Blake, the morning of the 17th. Into his hands I gave my will. Strange as it may seem, I had inherited granny's money. On the 18th I ate a good dinner, and a light supper, and was sitting in the death cell waiting for midnight.

The warden had told me that Mike was to go first, as he was not holding up very well, but that I was to follow as quickly as possible after him. I was seated on my cot about eleven-thirty when I heard a slight sound by the cell door. I looked up quickly and saw three men standing just inside. At first I thought it was the guards waiting for me, but then I saw that my death watch was still sitting unconscious of their presence. From what Warden Benton has told me since, I know he was never conscious of them.

The three motioned me to remain as I was, and walked over to stand beside me. The first was a heavy-set, brutal-looking chap, with one green and one blue eye and a deep scar from the corner of his mouth to his left ear. He told me he was Cooky Burns, who had died in the chair a year before. The second, a big strapping Swede, said he was Ole Peterson, who I knew had been executed the night before I dressed in. The third was a little, bestial-faced negro, Wilky Boone. I knew him, for I had passed his cell in coming in, and he had shouted to me the week previous as he was led to the chair that he would be waiting for Mike and me. I stared at them open-mouthed. Cooky it was who did most of the talking.

"Well, Joe, you are due to burn," he said. "You see we know. We have ways of knowing that other people don't. We've come to see you through. George Nelson, Bat Muggins and Tony Caporetti are with Slippery Mike. We are your committee."

I looked at them only half comprehending.

"You see, Joe," Cooky went on, "though the rest of the world don't know it, we chaps who have been burned, or hung, or have had our heads chopped off, make a custom of seeing the new ones through. We always send a sort of welcoming committee. Well, we are yours. We have all been through the door there, we've all sat in the hot seat, we have all been burned. So we know just what you have coming.

"Now, Joe, just keep up your nerve. It ain't half bad, really—not very damned funny, for a fact, but no worse than a good many other ways of shufflin' off. We'll be with you, and stick to the end. Then it'll be your turn to see Butch Schroeder through next week. You see Wilky is here to see you. We find a right fresh one sort of helps keep up the pep; one you've seen, and watched the lights wink for. No doubt Slippery will be here in time to see you through as well; that is if he gets loose O. K. Sometimes they used to be a little bit careless in there, and a chap didn't get loose very good. That is rather unpleasant, but I'll say for Billy Jones, he gives you a plenty and does a good job.

"You see there is really two parts

to us here. If Bill does a good job, why, you're loose; if he don't you're only half loose, and have got an unpleasant hour or so getting the other half free. But Bill always does a good job."

"Just what is it like?" I asked somewhat tremulously.

"Oh, it might be worse. Sittin' there while the screws strap you in is the worst. Bill is pretty decent about not waitin' after they step back. When they let go of you, you know you ain't got more than a breath or two before he gives you the juice. Bill's a good workman; he gives you a hot shot the first crack. That knocks you silly. Mostly it loosens you up right now, and it's all over but the shoutin'. If it don't he gives you a second tingler that pretty nigh shakes everything loose, and follows that with a third that will finish you for fair if the others don't. I don't know myself after the first shot. Bill figured I was a pretty tough bird and handed me forty-five hundred right off the bat. I shook loose right now. Ten seconds after I got it, it was all over. Now Wilky here took all three cracks. How about it, Wilky?"

The little darky grinned ruefully.

"'Twa'n't so hot," he said. "Dat white boy figgah's Ah's puhty small an' gives me on'y twenty-six hund'ed foh de fust shot. Done shook me up an' knocked me plumb silly, but Ah knowed hit when he tuhned hit off. Couldn't wiggle a toe, but Ah could see and heah ev'ything. Second crack was twelve fifty. Dat sho done tickled me up right. Ah could feel mahse'f kicking 'gin dem straps, an' Ah done let out a grunt. Couldn't see nuffin' till he done let loose agin. Ah was done half loose den. Ah could see dem white folks sittin' thah lookin' sohtah green round dey gills. Reckon dat grunt fotched 'em. Den Billy give me de thuhd shot. Thuhty-eight hund'ed dat was. Golly! I done shook loose right now, buddy, and dat was all.

"Billy hain' neveh missed shakin' 'em loose sence he been doin' de 'cutin' heah. You jes' pin youah faith in Billy, Joe. Dat las' crack he hands 'em 'ud shake a efalunt out'n his cayhcass."

"Does it hurt much?" I asked them.

Wilky grinned.

"Sho hell when de fust crack hits you, white boy. Dat sho knocks yo' plumb silly. De rest ain' so bad. But doan' you git de idee hit's any picnic, 'case 'tain't. Main thing is she is sho quick. Bingo! She hits yo'-all, you squihm a bit, and den if yo' lucky dat's all, an' eff'n yo'-all hain't so lucky, why yo' gotta take a couple mo' shots maybe. Dey doan buhn yo' any moh, like dey did ol' Bunny Coopah. Bunny was de fust heah. Took seben shoots, Bunny did. Dey didn' know dey business dem days. Bunny'll tell yo'-all 'bout it sometime. We doan' let Bunny on 'ception committees. He'd sho' scare 'em eff'n we did. But doan' yo' wo'ey none. Billy knows he business. Ah jes' fooled him a little was all, but he done got me jes' de same."

He turned to Cooky suddenly.

"Dey's comin' atteh Slippery. Hope Geo'ge kep' his min' off'n hit. Mike was sho in a bad way. Dere dey go."

I heard a slight commotion out in the passage. Slippery was nearer the door than I and so didn't pass my cell. My visitors seemed able to see as well as though no walls existed.

"Slippery's purty shaky, Wilky. Think he'll make it?"

"Sho will, Cooky. Dat Nelson boy he sho wuhkin' on Slippery. Ah see dey got Johnson and Puhkins foh de screws. Dey had me. Nice boys dose. Dey sho do a quick job on de chair. But if Bill ain' mo' careful he gwine burn one o' dem boys. I bet Puhkins didn't mo' an' get his han' off'n me when Billy tuhned on de juice. Deh, dey is at de do'. Sho hits Slippery doan' hit. Good t'ing Johnson hab him tight. Always did t'ink Mike was

yalleh. Lookit dem boys wuk! Johnson's frew fust. Deh, Puhkins is puttin' on de headpiece. Deh, he jump back! Dat Billy sho good!"

As he spoke the lights gave the familiar flicker, dimmed for a full minute, then brightened. My companions peered eagerly.

"Missed it," said Cooky quietly. "Only gave him three thousand. Watch him this time."

Again the lights flickered and dimmed.

"That loosened him up. Half out, Wilky. Billy'll give him forty-five this time."

A third time the light dimmed.

"Yep, forty-five. Huh!"

All three watched with intentness but said nothing. The lights flashed up.

"Is it all right?" I asked anxiously.

"They're takin' him out," Cooky replied. "There comes the stretcher. It ain't often we get two a night. They're rollin' him back o' the screen. All set again. Billy's lookin' over the chair. All O. K. Well, Joe, buck up. They're comin'."

IT WAS a scant half-minute when the procession reached my cell door—the chaplain, the turnkey, and two guards. The chaplain spoke.

"We are ready, Joe. The time has come."

I laughed a bit nervously and replied huskily but steadily.

"All ready, chaplain."

"Good boy," said Cooky at my elbow while the other two nodded cheerfully. "You're a damned sight steadier than I was."

One of the guards patted me on the back encouragingly as the other slit my trouser leg. Then we started.

"Keep up your nerve, Joe," said Johnson the guard. "If you need help just lean on us. You are doin' fine. It won't take long. Just a step. Just step out with your head up. Only a few feet now. Here's the door."

As he spoke they hurried me along the corridor. It seemed but a moment when we paused at the door leading into the death chamber. It swung open and I stepped in between the guards. My eye fell at once upon the chair in the middle of the room. It was big and clumsy-looking, with the cable leading from it that was to convey my death stroke plainly visible. The manacles on the arms and legs seemed to gape for my limbs. I caught my breath quickly, and felt the hands of the two guards clutch the tighter.

"Steady, big boy," came the voice of Cooky. "It gets us all a bit to see the damned thing. There, that's better. Get into it. The quicker you are in the better. After you are down it don't matter much if your legs shake."

I was hurried across the few intervening steps. I caught a hurried glimpse of the white faces of the witnesses and noted queerly enough that they seemed rather sick. I even grinned a bit. I heard a slight noise behind the chair, and just as I was forced into it made out the little alcove with Billy Jones fingering his switches. On my left was a second small door, and a third large one in front of me just behind the chairs of the witnesses. Beside the second door was a low screen and I could glimpse the end of a white covered stretcher behind it. There lay what was left of Slippery Mike Donelson.

The guards were hurrying at their work. I felt the straps tightened on my wrists, elbows, ankles and knees. A band came across my chest; then I heard Cooky again.

"Lean back, buddy. Perkins can't fasten the head-strap."

I leaned back, and felt the strap, still warm from Slippery Mike's forehead, pulled tight across my own. The warmth reminded me of something.

"Where's Slippery?"

I remembered he was to have met me.

"Oh, he's over there behind the screen. Let yourself go, Joe. Here comes the headpiece. It'll be all over in a second now. Now grab a-hold and hang on! Here she comes!"

The headpiece came to rest on my head, I felt the cold grip of the leg electrode and then——

God! They hadn't told me what was to come. I would have been a shivering, sniveling coward if they had. The first shock was like a sudden blow, stunning for a second or so. I saw a million colored lights wheeling and bursting before my eyes, and then a steady knife-like lancing pain that seemed to permeate my whole being. At every alternation of the current it cut. I tried to scream but couldn't. I know now I did groan, and that some of the witnesses fainted. For a full minute it continued, then as suddenly stopped. Oh, the relief of that surcease!

For some reason the surgeon approached me with the stethoscope. From some source I gathered my willpower together. I feared he would pronounce me dead, and that I would be taken to the autopsy table a living being. I could hear my voice, an unnatural droning guttural thing:

"My God, I am not dead! Don't turn it on again!"

That voice really came through. I saw the witnesses shudder and the doctor stepped back. Then Billy gave me the second jolt. That was five thousand five hundred volts, the heaviest charge ever given a prisoner. Again the lancing pains. I could feel my body straining and tossing against the straps, and I tried to scream. The reports said I groaned audibly twice. Then suddenly the pain eased as the current was shut off. It had lasted two minutes three seconds, the heaviest and longest shock ever given. Somehow I seemed to be free from the chair and standing by my limp body. Then I heard Cooky's voice deep with awe.

"Gawd, what a shot! An' only half out! That boy is hell for punishment!"

Then the voice of Wilky.

"No mo' dan dat Slippery. He ain' cleah out yit, poh devil!"

So that was why Slippery had not met me as promised! Then came the third shock. It was not quite as bad as the others; the pain seemed duller, though still terrible. I could still feel my body tossing against the straps. Then it was shut off. My body lay limp in the straps. The surgeon approached and placed his instrument. Again I tried to tell them I was not dead; but I was helpless. He listened and then turned to say solemnly:

"I declare this man dead!"

THE straps were unloosened and I was placed on a second stretcher and rolled behind the screen beside Slippery Mike. Beside his body stood a faint wraith, like Mike yet unlike him. I found I could not speak, though I tried. Beside him were the forms of three men, and the three with me now joined them.

"Ain't that hell?" spoke Cooky. "Two in one night and didn't shake ary one loose. Well, we can't help 'em now. Our boy Joey took all Billy could give and begged for more."

"Well, Slippery took a plenty," responded one of the others. "Two tough babies, I'll tell a world. Well, then, for the autopsy room. That'll shake 'em loose!"

The six were gone.

Just what had happened I still am not sure. Possibly the old Egyptian idea of the duality of the soul is right. From Cooky's words it would seem so. Possibly the "ka" is attached to the body and although the true soul may leave it it is not truly dead until the "ka" is freed. Mike and I were numbered with the "undead" yet were not of the living. I could feel, even more acutely than in life, the pressure of my body on the stretcher and the coarse covering over my face.

After some minutes Perkins and

Johnson returned, opened the side door and rolled us into a second room. Mike they lifted upon the autopsy table, where they stripped his clothing from him. My body they also stripped, and covered us both again with the sheets.

Then through a second door came the surgeons, Dr. Benson, Dr. White, and Dr. Swanson. They were in operating-gowns, with rubber-gloved hands, and each carried a small instrument case. These they opened and placed upon a little side-table, arranging the instruments calmly and chatting while they did it.

I could see a look of terror upon the faintly discernible features of Mike's wraith. Calmly and deliberately Dr. Benson made the first incision from the inner point of Slippery's left shoulder across to the right. The wraith that was Slippery writhed and the face contorted, his mouth opened as though in a long-drawn-out scream. As deliberately Benson cut from chin to pelvis, laying the abdomen open, I could see Slippery's bowels, still warm and smoking. Again the poor wraith writhed in agony, while his hands tried futilely to ward off the gleaming knife as it tore through the flesh.

Talking casually, Benson grasped his bone-cutters and began to snip the ribs on each side of the chest cut. They were reflected back, and the still warm chest of Slippery was exposed to sight. I could see in its midst the heart, a heart that seemed to quiver and shrink as Benson touched it and began to massage it.

"Queer thing, Swanson," he said laughing. "I've been told that occasionally massage will start the heart for a few beats. Never have seen it myself, but I always try it. By Jove, there it goes!"

I could see the stilled heart of Mike pick up its pumping. The poor wraith sank down in agony and grew fainter as it beat a few beats. Then it ceased, and Slippery's groveling form became clearer. It quivered all over a moment while the doctors watched in interested silence. Then Swanson laughed shortly.

"Look out, Benson, he'll come to on you. By George, is he dead or not?"

Benson laughed.

"Dead as a herring, Swanson. Merely muscular contraction; tissue reaction, nothing more."

The dissection went on. Bit by bit as the tissue was exposed and removed the three commented on its condition. Swanson alone seemed a bit squeamish, remarking he didn't care for autopsy on still warm corpses. To Benson it had become a commonplace affair. Slippery, poor chap, was in a pitiable condition. The prolonged agony of the hour's slow dismemberment had marked his wraith-features with the same terrible marks that a similar torture would have produced on his face had he been a living, sentient being. Every cut of the knife, each organ torn loose, every muscle wrenched out, each bone disjointed, had produced agony as keen as upon living flesh, with no blessed loss of consciousness to put a period to the agony.

Benson picked up a small saw and prepared to open the skull. The poor wraith's hand came up to clutch his head as though to ward off the saw. Once more he dropped writhing to the floor, groveling and twisting with contorted face and twisted limbs. The skull cap came off, and the keen knives of the surgeons began to tear off the membranes and cut into the substance.

Suddenly the groveling Slippery ceased to writhe. The twisted face smoothed out. I noticed that the dim form grew suddenly clearer. It stood now, beside his dismembered body, smiling. Then he turned to walk toward me.

"My God, that was sure hell!"

Mike was speaking to me.

"Praise be I'm finally shook loose. I'm sorry for you, Joe. I hope they

make it snappy for you. That is sure hell. The chair was a pleasure beside it. Pray your damnedest that Benson don't try to start you up again. Good-bye, till you're loose, Joe. I don't think I could stand watchin'."

He was gone. Trembling with anticipated anguish I watched the three unconscious ghouls chattering over the poor twisted brain-stuff of Slippery Mike.

WELL, it finally ended. They bustled the remnants of Mike back into his gutted shell, except for the fragments they retained to satisfy their curiosity. They moved him off the table, and the three lifted my limp form upon it. I tried in vain to fight them off. My hand met nothing, or rather it seemed to go through their solid flesh as though it were not there. My body, still warm and limp, would not respond to my will. I was stretched out, and Benson was reaching for his knife. I shut my eyes; then a sharp lancing pain from shoulder tip to shoulder tip, as the keen blade cut through skin and flesh.

I writhed, I tried to scream, and then — a million multicolored lights burst and wheeled before my eyes, the world spun crazily, thunderous rushing winds roared in my ears—I was lying nude and helpless on the table, but again a breathing, sentient being. I groaned, and my thick tongue tried to mumble words.

The three stepped back in horror. Swanson seized my wrist, while White fumbled for his stethoscope.

"There is a pulse, rather weak but gaining," exclaimed Swanson. "Respiration is beginning. I'll be damned!"

"Good God, he's not dead!"

Benson stepped back, his eyes dilated with horror.

"But I'll take my oath that there was no sign of heart action when I pronounced him dead! Why—why—doctor, he took three of the heaviest shocks ever given in this prison! What can we do?"

The three looked at each other in doubt. Then White turned to Benson.

"By God, Benson, I'm no state executioner. If you expect me to finish him, or stand by while you do, you've guessed wrong!"

"My God, no!" shouted Benson; then turning to Swanson, "Go for the warden."

In the five minutes before the warden came I had begun to breathe naturally and to recover muscular control. He looked pretty sick when he came. Painfully I gasped out that I was not dead. He turned nonplussed to the doctors.

"Well, this is a pretty mess! Came to on the table, eh? And he is semi-conscious, more's the pity. Will he recover, doctor?"

Swanson shook his head doubtfully.

"You can't say for sure, but my idea is he will. What do you two think?"

"Undoubtedly, Swanson," replied White shortly.

The warden looked angrily at them.

"Look here, you three, what have you been up to? Artificial respiration, or what? This is no joke. This man is supposed to have been executed; he has been, and has been officially pronounced dead. The witnesses are gone, the executioner is gone, and only God and the Supreme Court know what his status is. I doubt that I can legally re-execute him, and I'll be damned if I'll take the responsibility for doing so. Benson, you pronounced him dead; it will be your official neck that goes for reviving him."

"But, good God, warden!" protested Benson. "As God is my witness, we did nothing. Ten minutes ago we finished with Mike and put Joe on the table. I made the first incision — you can see it there now, bleeding—and the damned corpse groaned! Then he came to. I tell

you he was dead, dead as Judas Iscariot! No pulse, no heart, no respiration, no reaction of life in him. If he wasn't dead, I never saw a dead man. Why, man, he took fifty-five hundred volts for over two minutes! If that won't kill, then juice never kills. Ask the other two. They saw everything here. They have been with me every minute until he groaned."

The warden looked at the others, who nodded agreement.

"Well, what's to be done?" he finally asked.

"That's up to you, warden," replied Benson.

"It's a damned pity he wasn't cut up too far to come back. Well, no, I won't say that either, I'll say it's a damned pity it happened. I can't re-execute him; I doubt I could legally, and I'll resign before I try it. Poor devil, do you suppose he knew all the time? Oh, Lord, what a mess! I'm phoning the governor and the attorney-general. If they tell me to try it again, I'll resign."

Well, they revived me, and I told my story. They didn't believe it at first, but even Warden Benton agreed that my description of Cooky was perfect, even to his little mannerisms of walk and movement. And I had never seen Cooky alive. They finally believed my tale. The attorney-general was of the opinion that since I had been legally executed once, and had been legally pronounced dead before witnesses, the state was through with me. I stayed with the warden under cover for a couple of months, and then on the suggestion of my old attorney, Blake, I was released to come down here. Blake has furnished me my money from old Granny Shelton's estate, which I had left to him for his efforts in my behalf.

That is all. Believe it or not, this is a true tale. You may see the scar from Benson's knife across my shoulders, or may ask any of the people who know the truth.

* * * * * * *

It may be noted in closing that the scar was plainly visible, and that the story has been corroborated by those who knew of it at the time.

SONNET OF DEATH

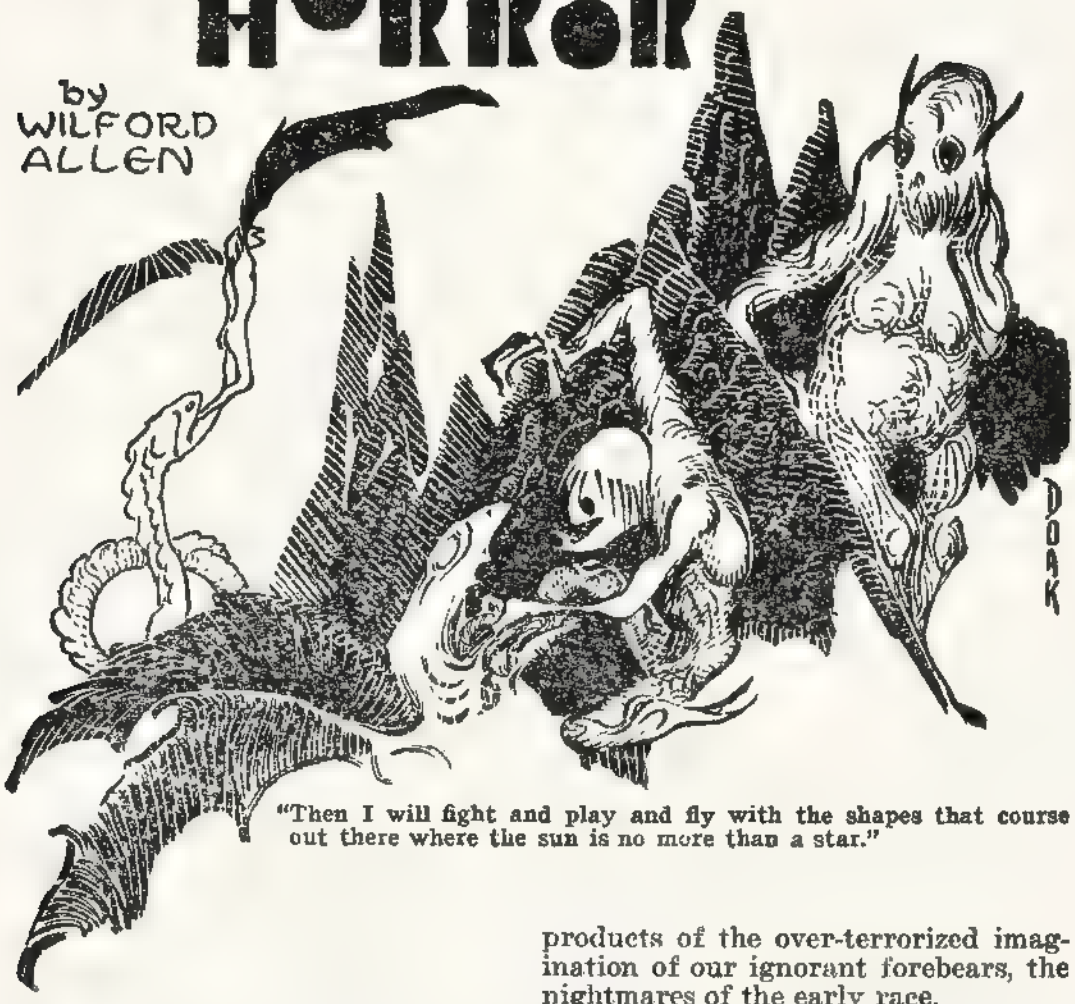
By **EDITH HURLEY**

I woke at midnight with a sense of doom
And terror that no reasoning could dispel;
Far off I heard the tolling of a bell,
And felt a horror in the darkened room.
It was as though I rested in a tomb,
Or lay a prisoner in some airless cell.
In trembling squares the pallid moonlight fell,
And eery shadows gathered in the gloom.

An ancient fear possessed my very soul,
And crushed my thoughts and took my gasping breath;
In vain I struggled and in vain I cried,
For weary Slumber came, and softly stole
Over my heart, and, as the candle died,
I walked, a stranger, in the Halls of Death.

The PLANET of HORROR

by WILFORD ALLEN



"Then I will fight and play and fly with the shapes that course out there where the sun is no more than a star."

AMONG the world's mysteries of supernatural terror there are few which modern science will not laugh to scorn. But there is one of which it will not even speak, let alone admit publicly that there is any basis for the tale. And as for smiling at its mention—try it out some time on one of the few scientists who know! Lycanthropy, vampirism, demonology, all such terrors of the ancient world, have long been outlawed, set down as products of the over-terrorized imagination of our ignorant forebears, the nightmares of the early race.

But in the case of the most horrible mystery of all, if you could back one of the informed scientists into a metaphorical corner and, pledging secrecy, get at what science actually knows of what occurred, you would be astonished, and more—much more. I learned by accident, and ever since I have been oppressed by strange sensations of horror. And I never knew all the truth. No man ever did and lived on, a human being capable of telling it.

At the most, science knows but little of the Thing. To begin with, it knew, as the world at large knows, that since interplanetary navigation has become a routine matter, ships have disappeared occasionally, just as in preceding eras airplanes and ocean liners dropped from sight without apparent reason, leaving no word of the fate which struck them down, although equipped with the most dependable means of communication. A ship went out and never returned. Nothing further was ever heard of it, no one had news of it after a certain moment, when everything was well and there was apparently no reason to suspect an impending tragedy. The ships simply vanished.

Naturally the laboratory staff of the Interplanet was interested, doing its best to fathom the mystery, but getting nowhere. And then Hobart Smallin, staff computer of the great concern, made his extraordinary announcement. There was disbelief from all quarters, but not for long. Proof came with dramatic suddenness.

Smallin sat quietly at his desk while the Interplanet heads filed in one by one. He seemed to have collapsed into himself, his chin sunken down to the support of his chest, his eyes staring into the chart before him as if already he felt the encroaching influence of the Thing. He said nothing, until MacAndrews, the Interplanet president himself, entered solemnly. He said little then, except, at a nod from MacAndrews, to indicate that the others should approach and look upon the chart which he had prepared.

"What do you see there, gentlemen?" his voice sounded harshly.

Arthur, transport manager, raised his eyes in surprize.

"Why—just the orbit of one of the planets."

"Take another look," Smallin murmured grimly. "Which planet?"

"It — it's between Saturn and Uranus," Arthur stammered as his eyes returned to take in the details. "There isn't any planet there."

"You are right," Smallin agreed. "Those dots represent, not the positions of any known planet, but of the Interplanet ships which have vanished, as of the last moment that their whereabouts was known to us. But here is the problem, gentlemen." His voice fell to a dusky whisper. "As Arthur noticed, when plotted they are grouped along a curve which resembles that of a planet. The resemblance goes farther. If we group the positions in two parts, compute normal place, from each group, and compute the resulting orbits, the two come out identical — which is overwhelming proof that the entire list of missing transports vanished by coming under the influence of something which has a planetary motion about the sun."

"But there is no planet there," Arthur objected. "Even so small a planet as one ten miles in diameter would have been picked up before now. And the chance of thirty-three ships colliding with an object less than ten miles in diameter is ridiculously small. One might, although the chance would be remote. Two might by a most unusual freak of the probabilities. But more than two—the chances against it would be a trillion to one. And thirty-three! That is my idea of a perfect impossibility, if there is such a thing."

"But the ships did vanish," MacAndrews broke in. "And they vanished in the positions which are indicated on that chart."

"It's clear enough," Branton, of the detectives, had reached his conclusion. "It's banditry. Some gang of outlaws are operating from a base on one of the Saturnian moons."

"I thought of that at first," Smallin nodded gloomily. "But—in that case the progress of the spot of attack through space should keep pace with that of Saturn. The chances against it's assuming the exact progression of a planet acting under the laws of grav-

ity at the appropriate distance is so small as to be nil."

"Maybe," Branton grunted indifferently. "I don't know about the mathematics. But if it is so improbable, what's to prevent the fellows from knowing as much as you do about its improbability, from plotting what would be the orbit of a planet revolving about the sun at the chosen distance, and staging their attacks along the computed orbit for the purpose of puzzling us?"

"That is possible," Smallin admitted. "But—I don't think that represents the facts."

"Then what are the facts?" Branton sneered.

"I—I'm not ready to say yet. They would be unbelievable. I want to hear the opinions of some of the others first."

"No use wasting time," Branton announced. "The thing is plain enough. I'm off for the defense department at Washington. God!" His enthusiasm rose. "This will be the biggest thing ever. The President will give me a whole fleet to go after the bandits with!"

"Wait!" MacAndrews commanded. "We have one more proof, if any is needed. When I got Smallin's note I could not believe, and yet there was a transport, No. 28, approaching the danger zone at that moment. I did not know its exact position, but was aware that it was close enough to be in danger. I had a message sent to direct it to change course and circle the spot where the chart indicates the danger lies at this moment. The message, gentlemen, was not acknowledged! That was why I was late. For I hurried then to the chartroom. The pathway of 28 had reached the spot a half-hour before my message had been sent! No. 28 is lost! And, when computations can predict ahead of time, we have no choice but to believe that they are entirely reliable. Now, with Dr. Smallin, I want the opinions of all of you, and we will thresh this out now."

The opinions of all coincided with that already expressed by Branton, and the decision was reached that an expedition must be sent out to clear the region of the band of outlaws who were presumably operating. Only Smallin held out against the others, and as he admitted that he had no material proof to back his weird belief, it was disregarded.

"Go home and rest, Smallin," MacAndrews laid his hand soothingly on the bowed shoulders of the computer. "You have been working too hard. This has been a strain, and your brain needs a rest. We can't afford to have you crack that head of yours, Smallin."

THE men trooped out, Brandon to hop triumphantly to Washington, the others to return to their various posts. Number 28 was lost! There were now thirty-four missing ships. Smallin sat alone, staring into the chart again.

Acting vigorously but secretly, the government equipped a fleet with the latest devices of offense, the newly perfected annihilating ray foremost among them.

For three weeks the punitive expedition drove uneventfully on, reporting its progress every hour in a routine manner. Then it began to draw near the zone of danger. On the day when it was due to arrive, the officials of the Interplanet, together with the Secretary of Defense, were closeted in the spacious office of the latter at the capital. The fleet was sending bulletins at five-minute intervals, and all were watching them eagerly as they were flashed onto the screen. Then came one, unbelievable in its import.

"Number 87, on scouting duty, has vanished. No sound or sign to indicate conflict. The ship simply faded into nothingness!"

Then in rapid staccato, "Power

shut off—brakes working! The next ship has vanished! Numbers 45 and 127, following in parallel, also gone! No sign of struggle! Brakes on full power, but we are still drifting up against the spot where they disappeared. We are——" The message was interrupted abruptly.

A moment later the story was taken up by one of the rear-guard, which had managed to swerve off in time to avoid the fate of the leaders.

"All but three ships lost. Leader lost. Awaiting instructions. For your information there was no sign of enemy. Ahead is uninterrupted view of sky, yet other ships have vanished as if they plunged into and through an opaque screen. How can there be an opaque screen if the stars beyond show through so clear? There is something wrong out here. It is something —terrible. A peculiar feeling— psychic distress, horror—noted by all. We await instructions."

The secretary looked about the table at the horror-stricken faces. MacAndrews nodded at the unspoken question. The cabinet officer turned to a messenger who was staring goggle-eyed.

"Message! Return at once. Signed Burleigh."

Then he turned to the others again, terror showing through his wide-breached eyes.

"Gentlemen, we have met defeat. By what?" he mouthed the awful question which was burning in the brains of all.

But the story was not yet told. Before the instructions could get on their way another message came, and the men leaped to their feet in uncontrollable horror at its import.

"Something — terrible — happening," the words came as though stuttering. Then they burst into frantic speed. "We can no longer control our movements. I have just managed to tear the Thing loose for a second, but I know it will clutch my brain again with its frozen fingers! It has already caught the others, and they are driving the ships straight toward the hell where the first ships vanished. I know it now! It's hell! And the cold devil of hell is after me again. He's clawing at the base of my brain! Clawing! Clawing with talons of nothing and ice! Freez——" The message of terror came to a sudden end.

There was nothing but silence in the big room. Eyes told what words could not formulate. And there was Hobart Smallin, still seated, staring as though his eyes were focused on that far point in space where a nothingness that froze and tore at the brains of humans drew them to itself in a hell of nothingness and horror.

IT WAS difficult to hush the thing up, for even soldiers have relatives, and the vanished men were the cause of many inquiries. But it had to be done, and it was done in the way governments have done the same before.

One thing had been demonstrated. Whatever it was, the destroyer had not operated in the expected manner. Only Smallin seems to have had any idea of the form the Thing would take in striking, and so incredible was it that he had not dared to utter his thoughts until the awful happening itself had lent them authority. He knew well that the mere mention of them without that fearful backing would have put him in an asylum as hopelessly insane.

The enemy had not operated as a bandit group would have done. If it had possessed the secret of the annihilating ray there would have been flashes to mark the end of each ship as the destroying beam played on it. But there had been no suggestion of such, no sign of danger until the incredible had taken place. Each ship had simply vanished, swallowed up. Swallowed by what? The only clue to that was in the despairing message from the last three ships, which had

halted and come under the mysterious influence gradually. It was no clue, for it only told of horror, of nothingness that took the form of devilish cold, of fingers that, freezing, imbedded themselves in the brain, while having no material form. Such clues were useless to men who were sane.

Hobart Smallin was like a man who was dying and yet could not die. He went on, a shrunken wreck, but driving relentlessly, sparing neither himself nor the workmen on a car which he had persuaded MacAndrews to authorize. Its mechanism was sealed in such a way that once started it was beyond the control of the operator. No matter what insane notion he might take to stop or turn, he would be powerless to change its course. A control was devised which would, after steering the ship out to a designated spot, turn and bring it back to earth again, if the ship itself survived intact. In that ship the computer purposed to explore the region of death and bring back information of some kind, if it were mechanically possible to do so.

Then, one night, he sealed himself in the car and was gone. MacAndrews had pleaded with him, but without effect.

"Look at me," Smallin had demanded. "My physician gives me just six months to live. Do you think I can last that long?"

MacAndrews had looked, and his lips had begun to mouth a comforting disclaimer, but he had stopped in its midst, aware that his eyes had betrayed his real conviction. "But it's the strain of this thing that is killing you, Hobart. As soon as it is settled you will be all right again. You know that's true. You are taking it too hard."

Again Smallin's only response was a question. "What chance is there of clearing it up within six months?" he asked.

And again MacAndrew's eyes supplied the answer.

"No," Smallin muttered. "It's got me, just as it did those others. I don't know how, but it has. If you could see what I do at times! This way there is a bare chance I can do something. I'm dead, anyway. Goodbye!"

And he had swung quickly aboard, locking and barring the door behind him, then pouring into the crack between the door and jamb the quick-setting cement that was to seal him in. And a moment later the ship had lifted.

No one of the few who were aware of its going ever thought to see it again. But they were mistaken.

THREE months later, moving under automatic control, the car appeared over the earth, where it came under the influence of the Interplanet's landing controls and was guided slowly toward the big field, settling down as gently as if obeying the hand of Smallin on the controls within. The staff, assembled by the astonishing news, rushed out to meet it.

And then a strange thing occurred. The whole group halted in the same instant, as though an invisible hand had reached out from the car to bar their way. The actual agent, however, was not a hand, but a sense of impending horror which hit all with devastating effect. While the group drew back in that excess of terror, there came an explosion within the car, and the door was blown outward. A moment later Smallin staggered out.

It was only because they knew Smallin had been within that they knew it was he. And at that sight the group broke and fled—fled screaming, yelling, clawing madly at unnamable horror. Smallin halted, stood there, indescribable. It seemed that no human could have altered so and still possessed life. That, possibly, was the key. He may not have possessed human life such as we know it. And yet

the man was alive in some way. He did move, and the integrity of his original purpose still lived to actuate him and control his movements and speech.

Seeing that he was standing quietly, a few of those in whom the element of iron was most pronounced turned and forced themselves back toward him, against the frantic opposition of every instinct of their beings. To the relief of that instinct Smallin halted then with a gesture at a distance of some forty paces.

"For God's sake!" his words came horribly. "Don't come closer! It might get you! If its tentacles once clutch your brain, no power can get them loose!"

"What! What——" MacAndrew was stammering, the first time in a life of decisive action. "There is nothing. You—imagine it. There is absolutely nothing!"

"That's the damnableness of it," the weird Thing answered. "There is. It's fast to me like a rubber band that has been stretching and stretching and as it stretched pulling and sucking on my brain! I can't hold against it much longer. Go into the car. The story is there. But this is what I must say, and I had to show you myself to make you believe. Never allow anyone near that cursed spot. Keep away. Nothing—nothing can fight That!" A note of wilder terror entered his voice. "Run! Run!" he shrieked. "I can't hold it off. If I touch you—oh, God! Keep off! Keep off!"

The group was split by then, and fleeing desperately. MacAndrew dared a look behind, and fled more horrified for what he saw—or didn't see. For where the thing that had been Smallin had just stood, there was bare ground. No human speed could have taken him the distance to the nearest concealment in the second. And, as a search soon proved, he had not hidden either in the car or among the surrounding buildings. He had vanished, as the missing cars had gone.

It was an hour before the car was entered and the diary was found. The contents of the diary are a part of the mystery, for it was destroyed by its soul-sick readers. Of the four who read it, MacAndrews lasted the longest—a few weeks more than a year. Nervous breakdown, collapse from overwork and strain—so the physician's pronouncements ran. I signed MacAndrews' death certificate myself.

So even science does not know what the diary contained. But the Interplanet routes all travel wide of that red orbit traced on all of its charts without explanation. The strict orders which the government has issued that all travelers must avoid the zone is usually believed to mean that the Department of Defense has set it aside as a military reservation, on which it conducts dangerous experiments and maneuvers.

I WAS with MacAndrews when he died. And I do not want to see another such passing.

He went completely out of his head. He imagined awful things—or was it that the resistance which he had built in his mind against even thinking of them had broken down in the last moments? I wish I knew. I would feel better if I thought that raving was only delirium. But—then I recall how it checked up with what went before.

"Burleigh," he mumbled the Defense Secretary's name, "here is the diary. I—haven't read it yet. Wanted your moral support," he cackled terribly.

"It is unbelievable," his voice erupted again, shakily. "Human mind—can not picture. But if you can not you can do nothing. And if you can you can also—do nothing. Nothing!" His voice sank for a moment, and I leaned forward to see if the end had come. I had another

patient to whom time meant much, but yet I could not leave this dying man.

"——world founded on horror as ours is on atoms," he mumbled on. "Atoms of horror, inhabited by horror of all shapes. A billion horrors, clawing — sucking — freezing the spine."

His facial muscles were working horribly, but I could not tear my gaze away.

"A planet, but not of rock. A Thing of stuff without material existence. Horror become matter—invisible — all-powerful. Once men on earth saw forms of nothingness that rode, twisting horribly, the clouds and the winds clucking with loathsome glee, grinning hellishly, as they roved the night suckled by the deadly moon. I understand now! A planet of horror revolved about the earth, an attendant moon. Pace with the farther moon it kept, consorting with it in its play of hell, reaching and sucking out the minds of those who exposed themselves to its grip. Those old horror legends! God! How horrible their basis is!"

He was carried away with the surge of the thing.

"I recognize it now," he screamed, "that strange prickling feeling which starting at the base of the brain runs up and down the spine and circles the brain when horror grips a man. It is a relic of days when the Things like This clutched through the dark to insert their freezing talons in the gray matter of the medulla oblongata. God!" His voice was beginning to fail. "What a relief it—get out of this car—back—free then of this—frozen sucking that burns through—my brain. It will go when I—no longer—oppose it."

His voice rose in one last ecstasy of horror.

"Then I will fight and play and fly with the shapes that course out there where the sun is no more than a star. Shapes you have never seen, and pray to God you—never see! I will exist forever with the Horrors, a Horror myself, coming and going—shrieking and howling—sucking at the throats of indescribable Horror, and feeling its suck at my throat! Whirling in dark that only hides from human eyes the joys I will know! Joys of clawing—of unmentionable things—of——"

He said more—a few words, before he finally died. But hardly printable. Except where they are imprinted terribly in my mind. I hope no one is present when I die. I might forget myself and repeat all that MacAndrews did.

THE LAST INCANTATION

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

MALYGRIS the magician sat in the topmost room of his tower that was builded on a conical hill above the heart of Susran, capital of Poseidonis. Wrought of a dark stone mined from deep in the earth, perdurable and hard as the fabled adamant, this tower loomed above all others, and flung its shadow far on the roofs and domes of the

city, even as the sinister power of Malygris had thrown its darkness on the minds of men.

Now Malygris was old, and all the baleful might of his enchantments, all the dreadful or curious demons under his control, all the fear that he had wrought in the hearts of kings and prelates, were no longer enough to assuage the black ennui of his days. In his chair that was fashioned from the ivory of mastodons, inset with terrible cryptic runes of red tourmalins and azure crystals, he stared moodily through the one lozenge-shaped window of fulvous glass. His white eyebrows were contracted to a single line on the umber parchment of his face, and beneath them his eyes were cold and green as the ice of ancient floes; his beard, half white, half of a black with glaucous gleams, fell nearly to his knees and hid many of the writhing serpentine characters inscribed in woven silver athwart the bosom of his violet robe. About him were scattered all the appurtenances of his art; the skulls of men and monsters; phials filled with black or amber liquids, whose sacrilegious use was known to none but himself; little drums of vulture-skin, and crotali made from the bones and teeth of the cockodrill, used as an accompaniment to certain incantations. The mosaic floor was partly covered with the skins of enormous black and silver apes; and above the door there hung the head of a unicorn in which dwelt the familiar demon of Malygris, in the form of a coral viper with pale green belly and ashen mottlings. Books were piled everywhere: ancient volumes bound in serpent-skin, with verdigris-eaten clasps, that held the frightful lore of Atlantis, the pentacles that have power upon the demons of the earth and the moon, the spells that transmute or disintegrate the elements; and runes from a lost language of Hyperborea, which, when uttered aloud, were more deadly than poison or more potent than any philtre.

But, though these things and the power they held or symbolized were the terror of the peoples and the envy of all rival magicians, the thoughts of Malygris were dark with immitigable melancholy, and weariness filled his heart as ashes fill the hearth where a great fire has died. Immovable he sat, implacable he mused, while the sun of afternoon, declining on the city and on the sea that was beyond the city, smote with autumnal rays through the window of greenish-yellow glass, and touched his shrunken hands with its phantom gold, and fired the balas-rubies of his rings till they burned like demonian eyes. But in his musings there was neither light nor fire; and turning from the grayness of the present, from the darkness that seemed to close in so imminently upon the future, he groped among the shadows of memory, even as a blind man who has lost the sun and seeks it everywhere in vain. And all the vistas of time that had been so full of gold and splendor, the days of triumph that were colored like a soaring flame, the crimson and purple of the rich imperial years of his prime, all these were chill and dim and strangely faded now, and the remembrance thereof was no more than the stirring of dead embers. Then Malygris groped backward to the years of his youth, to the misty, remote, incredible years, where, like an alien star, one memory still burned with unfailing luster—the memory of the girl Nylissa whom he had loved in days ere the lust of unpermitted knowledge and necromantic dominion had ever entered his soul. He had well-nigh forgotten her for decades, in the myriad preoccupations of a life so bizarrely diversified, so replete with occult happenings and powers, with supernatural victories and perils; but now, at the mere thought of this slender and innocent child, who had loved him so dearly when he too was young and slim and guileless, and who had died of a sudden mysterious fever on

the very eve of their marriage-day, the mummy-like umber of his cheeks took on a phantom flush, and deep down in his icy orbs was a sparkle like the gleam of mortuary tapers. In his dreams arose the irretrievable suns of youth, and he saw the myrtle-shaded valley of Meros, and the stream Zemander, by whose ever-verdant marge he had walked at eventide with Nylissa, seeing the birth of summer stars in the heavens, the stream, and the eyes of his beloved.

Now, addressing the demonian viper that dwelt in the head of the unicorn, Malygris spoke, with the low monotonous intonation of one who thinks aloud:

"Viper, in the years before you came to dwell with me and to make your abode in the head of the unicorn, I knew a girl who was lovely and frail as the orchids of the jungle, and who died as the orchids die. . . . Viper, am I not Malygris, in whom is centered the mastery of all occult lore, all forbidden dominations, with dominion over the spirits of earth and sea and air, over the solar and lunar demons, over the living and the dead? If so I desire, can I not call the girl Nylissa, in the very semblance of all her youth and beauty, and bring her forth from the never-changing shadows of the cryptic tomb, to stand before me in this chamber, in the evening rays of this autumnal sun?"

"Yes, master," replied the viper, in a low but singularly penetrating hiss, "you are Malygris, and all sorcerous or necromantic power is yours, all incantations and spells and pentacles are known to you. It is possible, if you so desire, to summon the girl Nylissa from her abode among the dead, and to behold her again as she was ere her loveliness had known the ravening kiss of the worm."

"Viper, is it well, is it meet, that I should summon her thus? . . . Will there be nothing to lose, and nothing to regret?"

The viper seemed to hesitate. Then, in a more slow and measured hiss: "It is meet for Malygris to do as he would. Who, save Malygris, can decide if a thing be well or ill?"

"In other words, you will not advise me?" the query was as much a statement as a question, and the viper vouchsafed no further utterance.

Malygris brooded for awhile, with his chin on his knotted hands. Then he arose, with a long-unwonted celerity and sureness of movement that belied his wrinkles, and gathered together, from different coigns of the chamber, from ebony shelves, from caskets with locks of gold or brass or electrum, the sundry appurtenances that were needful for his magic. He drew on the floor the requisite circles, and standing within the centermost he lit the thuribles that contained the prescribed incense, and read aloud from a long narrow scroll of gray vellum the purple and vermilion runes of the ritual that summons the departed. The fumes of the censers, blue and white and violet, arose in thick clouds and speedily filled the room with ever-writhing interchanging columns, among which the sunlight disappeared and was succeeded by a wan unearthly glow, pale as the light of moons that ascend from Lethe. With preternatural slowness, with unhuman solemnity, the voice of the necromancer went on in a priest-like chant till the scroll was ended and the last echoes lessened and died out in hollow sepulchral vibrations. Then the colored vapors cleared away, as if the folds of a curtain had been drawn back. But the pale unearthly glow still filled the chamber, and between Malygris and the door where hung the unicorn's head there stood the apparition of Nylissa, even as she had stood in the perished years, bending a little like a wind-blown flower, and smiling with the unmindful poignancy of youth. Fragile, pallid, and simply gowned, with anemone blossoms in her black hair, with eyes

that held the new-born azure of vernal heavens, she was all that Malygris had remembered, and his sluggish heart was quickened with an old delightful fever as he looked upon her.

"Are you Nylissa?" he asked—"the Nylissa whom I loved in the myrtle-shaded valley of Meros, in the golden-hearted days that have gone with all dead eons to the timeless gulf?"

"Yes, I am Nylissa." Her voice was the simple and rippling silver of the voice that had echoed so long in his memory. . . . But somehow, as he gazed and listened, there grew a tiny doubt—a doubt no less absurd than intolerable, but nevertheless insistent: was this altogether the same Nylissa he had known? Was there not some elusive change, too subtle to be named or defined, had time and the grave not taken something away—an innominable something that his magic had not wholly restored? Were the eyes as tender, was the black hair as lustrous, the form as slim and supple, as those of the girl he recalled? He could not be sure, and the growing doubt was succeeded by a leaden dismay, by a grim despondency that choked his heart as with ashes. His scrutiny became searching and exigent and cruel, and momently the phantom was less and less the perfect semblance of Nylissa, momently the lips and brow were less lovely, less subtle in their curves; the slender figure became thin, the tresses took on a common black and the neck an ordinary pallor. The soul of Malygris grew sick again with age and despair and the death of his evanescent hope. He could believe no longer in love or youth or beauty, and even the memory of these things was a dubitable mirage, a thing that might or might not have been. There was nothing left but shadow and grayness and dust, nothing but the empty dark and the cold, and a clutching weight of insufferable weariness, of immedicable anguish.

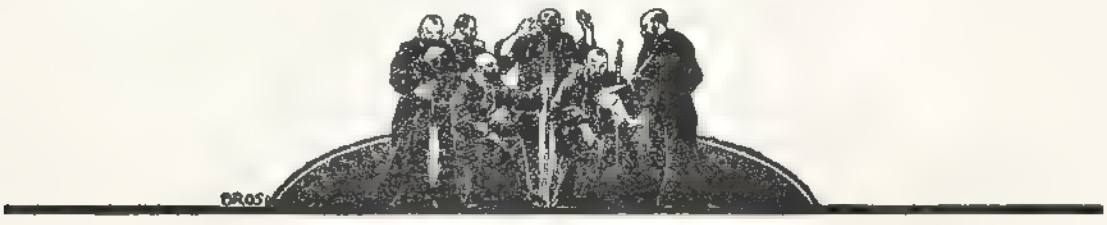
In accents that were thin and quavering, like the ghost of his former voice, he pronounced the incantation that serves to dismiss a summoned phantom. The form of Nylissa melted upon the air like smoke and the lunar gleam that had surrounded her was replaced by the last rays of the sun. Malygris turned to the viper and spoke in a tone of melancholy reproof:

"Why did you not warn me?"

"Would the warning have availed?" was the counter-question. "All knowledge was yours, Malygris, excepting this one thing; and in no other way could you have learned it."

"What thing?" queried the magician. "I have learned nothing except the vanity of wisdom, the impotence of magic, the nullity of love and the delusiveness of memory. . . . Tell me, why could I not recall to life the same Nylissa whom I knew, or thought I knew?"

"It was indeed Nylissa whom you summoned and saw," replied the viper. "Your necromancy was potent up to this point; but no necromantic spell could recall for you your own lost youth or the fervent and guileless heart that loved Nylissa, or the ardent eyes that beheld her then. This, my master, was the thing that you had to learn."



The PRIESTESS of the IVORY FEET

by SEABURY QUINN

"A moi, Sergent; a moi, les gendarmes; I have them!"

JULES DE GRANDIN replaced his Sèvres tea-cup on the tabouret and brushed the ends of his tightly waxed blond mustache with the tip of a well-manicured forefinger. From the expression on his little, mobile face it was impossible to say whether he was nearer laughter than tears. "And the lady, *chère Madame,*" he inquired solicitously, "what of her?"

"What, indeed?" echoed our hostess. Plainly, it was no laughing matter to Mrs. Mason Glendower, and I sat in a sort of horrified fascination, expecting momentarily to see the multiple-chinned, florid society dictator dissolve in tears before my eyes. A young woman's tears are appealing, an old woman's are pathetic, but a well-past-middle-aged, plump dowager's are an awful sight. Flabby, fat women quiver so when they weep.

"What, indeed?" she repeated, all three of her chins trembling ominously. "It would have been bad enough if she'd been a respectable shop-girl, or even an actress, but *this*—oh, it's too awful, Dr. de Grandin; it's terrible!"

My worst fears were realized. Mrs. Mason Glendower wept copiously and far from silently, and her chins and biceps, even her fat wrists, quivered

like a pyramid of home-made quince jelly on a Thanksgiving dinner table.

"*Tch-tch,*" de Grandin made a deprecating click with the tip of his tongue against his teeth. "It is deplorable, *Madame.* And the young *Monsieur,* your son, he is, then, entirely smashed upon this reprehensibly attractive young woman—you can not dissuade him?"

"No!" Mrs. Mason Glendower dabbed at her reddened eyes with a wisp of absurdly inadequate cambric. "I've tried to appeal to his family pride—his pride of ancestry, I've even had Dr. Stephens in to reason with him, but it's all useless. He just smiles in a sort of sadly superior way and says Estrella has shown him the light and that he pities our blindness—our blindness, if you please, and our family pew-holders in the First Methodist Church since the congregation was organized!

"Oh, Dr. Trowbridge"—she turned imploringly to me—"can't you suggest something? You've known Raymond all his life, you know what a clean, manly, *good* boy he's always been—it's bad enough for him to be set on marrying the young person, but to have her change his religion, drag him from the faith of his fathers into this heathenish, outlandish cult—oh, it seems, sometimes, as though he's actually losing his senses! If he'd ever drunk or caroused or inclined toward wildness it would be different, but——" And her emotion overcame her, and her words were smothered beneath an avalanche of sobs.

"*Tiens,* Madame Glendower," de Grandin remarked matter-of-factly, "a man may love liquor and have his senses sometimes, but if he love a woman—*hélas,* his case is hopeless. Only marriage remains, and even that sometimes fails to cure."

For a moment he regarded the sobbing matron with a thoughtful stare, then: "It may be Dr. Trowbridge and I can reason with the young *Monsieur* to more purpose than you or the good pastor," he suggested. "In my country we have a saying there are three sexes—men, women and clergymen. A headstrong young man, over-proud of his budding masculinity, is apt to treat advice from mother or minister alike with contemptuous impatience. The physician, on the other hand, is in a different position. He is a man of the world, a man of science, with body, parts and passions like other men, yet with a vast experience of the penalties of folly. His words may well be listened to when those of women and priests would meet only with disdain."

I sat in open-mouthed astonishment at his temerity. To his logical Gallic mind the wisdom of his advice was obvious, but though he had lived among us several years, he had not yet learned to what heights of absurdity the Mother-cult has been raised in America, nor did he understand that it is the conventional thing to regard any woman, no matter how ignorant or inexperienced, as endowed with preternatural wisdom and omniscient foresight merely because she has at some time fulfilled the biological function of race-perpetuation. And Mrs. Mason Glendower's thought-processes were, I knew, as conventional as a printed greeting card.

"You mean," the lady gasped, a sort of horrified incredulity replacing the grief in her countenance—"you mean you actually think a *doctor* can have more influence with a son than his pastor or his *mother?*"

"Perfectly, *Madame,*" he replied imperturbably. Her scandalized astonishment was lost on him; it was as though she had asked whether in his opinion novocain were preferable to cocain as an anesthetic in appendectomy.

"Well——" I braced myself for the coming storm, but, amazingly, it failed to materialize. "Perhaps you're right, Dr. de Grandin," she conceded with a sudden strange meekness.

"Whatever you do, you can't fail any more than Dr. Stephens and I have failed."

She smiled wanly, with a trace of embarrassment. "You'll find Raymond in his room, now," she informed us, "but I doubt he'll see you. This is the time for his 'silence,' as he calls it, and——"

"*Eh bien, Madame,*" the little Frenchman chuckled, "lead us to his sanctuary. We shall break this silence of his, I make no doubt. Silence is golden, as your so glorious Monsieur Shakespeare has said, but a greater than he has said there is a time for silence and a time for speech. This, I think, is that time. But yes."

A BRAZEN bowl of incense burned in Raymond Glendower's room, its cloying, heady sweetness almost stunning us as we entered uninvited after half a dozen pleading calls and several timid knocks on the door by his mother had failed to evoke a response. Raymond perched precariously on a low, flat-topped stand similar to those used for supporting flower-pots, his legs crossed, feet folded sole upward upon his calves, his hands resting palm upward in his lap, the finger tips barely touching. His head was bowed and his eyes closed. So far as I could see, his costume consisted of a flowing white-muslin robe which might have been a folded sheet loosely belted at the waist, and a turban of the same material wound about his brow. Arms, legs, feet and breast were uncovered, for the robe hung open at the front, revealing his chest and the major portion of his torso. At first glance I was struck by the pallor of his face and the marked concavity of his cheeks; plainly the boy was suffering from primary starvation induced by a sudden diminution of diet.

"What's he been eating?" I whispered to his mother as the seated youth paid no more attention to our advent than he would have given the buzzing of a trespassing fly.

"Fruit," she whispered back, "fruit and nuts and raisins, and very little of each. It's against the discipline of the sect to eat anything killed or cooked."

"U'm," I murmured. "How long has this been going on?"

"Ever since he met that woman—nearly two months," she returned. "My poor boy's fading away before my eyes, and——"

"*S-s-sh!*" I warned. Like a sleeper awakened, young Glendower had opened his eyes and wriggled from his undignified perch like a contortionist unwinding himself from a knot.

"Oh, hullo, Dr. Trowbridge," he greeted, crossing the room to take my hand cordially. If he felt any embarrassment at being caught thus he concealed it admirably. "Pleased to meet you, Dr. de Grandin," he acknowledged my introduction. "Be with you in half a sec. if you'll wait till I get some clothes on."

We retired to the drawing-room, and in a few minutes the young man, normally attired in a well-tailored blue suit, joined us. His mother excused herself almost immediately, and Raymond glanced from de Grandin to me with a humorous twist of his well-formed lips.

"All right, Dr. Trowbridge," he invited, "you may fire when ready. I suppose Mother's called you in to show me the error of my ways. She had Stephens in the other day, and the reverend old fool will never know how near he came to assassination. He began by singsonging at me and ended by attacking Estrella's character. That's where I draw the line. If he hadn't been a preacher I'd have tossed him out on his neck. Just a little warning, gentlemen," he added pleasantly. "Go as far as you like in quoting Joshua, Solomon and Moses at me—I won't kick if you throw in a few passages from *Deuteronomy* for good measure, but one word against Estrella and we fight—physicians

don't share clerical immunity, you know."

"By no means, *Monsieur,*" de Grandin cut in quickly. "We have not had the honor of the young lady's acquaintance, and he who condemns without having seen is a fool. Also, we have no wish to scoff at your faith. Me, I am a deep student of all religions, and the practises of Yoga and similar systems interest me greatly. Is it possible that we, as serious students, might be permitted to see some of the outward forms of your so interesting cult?"

The boy warmed to his request as a stray dog responds to a friendly pat upon the head. Plainly he had heard nothing but complaints and naggings since he became involved in the strange religion which he professed, and the first remarks by an outsider which did not imply criticism delighted him.

"Of course," he answered enthusiastically; "that is, I'm almost sure I can arrange it for you." He paused a moment, as though considering whether to take us further into his confidence, then:

"You see, Estrella is Exalted High Hierophant of the Church of Heavenly Gnosis, and though I am unworthy of the honor, her Sublimity has deigned to look on me with favor"—there was a reverential tremor in his voice as he pronounced the words—"and it is even possible she may receive a revelation telling her we may marry, as ordinary mortals do, though that is more than I dare hope for." Again his words trembled on his lips, and we could see he actually fought for breath as he spoke, as though his wildly beating heart had expanded in his breast and pressed his lungs for space.

"U'm?" de Grandin was all polite attention. "And will you tell us something of the society's history, young *Monsieur?*"

"Of course," Raymond answered. "The Heavenly Gnosis is the latest manifestation of the Divine All which underlies everything. For thousands of years mankind has struggled blindly through the darkness, always seeking the Divine Light, always failing in its quest. Now, through the revelations of our Supreme Hierophant, the Godhead shall be made plain. Just twenty years ago the great boon came into the world, when Estrella, the Holy Child, was born. Like Mohammed and that other prophet whom men call Jesus, she was of humble parentage, but the Supreme Will follows Its own inscrutable designs in such matters—Buddha was a prince, Confucius was a scholar, Mohammed a camel-driver and Jesus the son of a carpenter. Estrella is the daughter of a laborer. She was born in a workman's shanty beside the tracks of the Santa Fe; her father was a section foreman and her mother a cook and washerwoman for the men; yet when the Holy Child was barely old enough to walk the cattle and horses in the fields would kneel before her and touch their noses to the earth as she toddled past.

"She was less than a year old when one of the workmen in her father's gang came upon her sitting between two great rattlesnakes while a third reptile reared on its tail before her and inclined its head in adoration. The man would have killed the snakes with his long-handled shovel, but the babe, who had never been heard to speak before, rebuked him for his impiety, reminding him that all things are God's creatures, and that he who takes life of any kind on any pretext is guilty of supreme sacrilege in usurping a function of Deity, and must expiate his sin through countless reincarnations."

"*Parbleu,* you astonish me!" said Jules de Grandin.

"Yes," Raymond continued with all the recent convert's fervor, "and from that day Estrella continued to prophesy and reveal truth after great truth. At her behest her parents gave

up eating the remains of any living thing and ceased desecrating the divine element of fire by using it to cook their food. Her father abandoned his work and went to live in the desert, where day by day, in the silence of the waste places, new revelations came to the Holy Child who has condescended to cast her glorious eyes on me, the most unworthy of her worshippers."

"*Mordieu*, you amaze me!" de Grandin declared. "And then?"

"When her period of preparation was done, her mother, who had committed all the wondrous things she foretold to writing, brought her East that the teeming cities of the seaboard might hear the words of truth from her own divine lips."

"*Cordieu*, you overwhelm me!" de Grandin assured him. "And have you found many converts to the faith, *Monsieur*?"

"N-no," Raymond admitted, "but those who have affiliated with us are important individually. There was Miss Stiles, a member of one of the state's oldest and wealthiest families. She was one of the first to be converted, and distinguished herself by her great ardor and acts of piety. She also brought a number of other influential people into the light, and——"

"May one inquire where this so estimable lady may be found now?" de Grandin asked softly. "I should greatly like to discuss——"

"She has passed through her final incarnation and dwells forever in the ineffable light emanated by the Divine All," young Glendower broke in. "She was summoned from battle to victory in the very moment of performing the supreme act of adoration, and——"

"In fine, *Monsieur*," de Grandin interrupted, "one gathers she is no more—she is passed away; defunct; dead?"

"In the language of the untaught —yes," Raymond admitted, "but we who have heard the truth know that she is clothed in garments of everlasting light and resides perpetually——"

"*Mais oui*," de Grandin cut in a trifle hastily, "you are undoubtlessly right, *mon ami*. Meantime, if you will endeavor to secure us permission to meet these so fortunate ones who bask in the sunlight of *Mademoiselle's* revelations, we shall be most greatly obliged. At present we have important duties which call us elsewhere. Yes, certainly."

"WELL, what about it?" I inquired as we drove homeward. "I'm frank to admit I didn't know what he was driving at half the time, and the other half I had to sit on my hands to keep from clouting the young fool on the head."

The little Frenchman laughed delightedly. "It is the love of the *petit chien* run wild, my friend," he told me. "Some young men when smitten by it turn to poetry; some attempt great deeds of derring-do to win their ladies' favor; this one has swallowed a bolus of undigested nonsense, plagiarized by an ignorant female from half the religions of the East, up to the elbow."

"Yes, but it has a serious aspect," I reminded. "Suppose he married that charlatan, and——"

"How wealthy is the Glendower family?" he interrupted. "Is the restrained elegance in which they live a mark of good taste, or a sign of comparative poverty?"

"Why," I replied, "I don't think they're what you could call rich. Old Glendower is reputed to have left a hundred thousand or so; but that's not considered much money nowadays, and——"

"But what of Monsieur Raymond's private fortune?" he demanded. "Does he possess anything outside his expectancy upon his mother's death?"

"How the devil should I know?" I answered testily.

"*Précisément,*" he agreed, in no way offended by my petulance. "If you will be good enough to drop me here, I shall seek information where it can be had reliably. Meantime, I implore you, arrange with your peerless cook to prepare a noble dinner against the time of my return. I shall be famished as a wolf."

"WHERE the deuce have you been?" I demanded as he entered the dining-room just as Nora McGinnis, my household factotum, was serving dessert. "We waited dinner for you till everything was nearly spoiled, and——"

"Alas, my friend, I am desolated," he assured me penitently. "But consider, is not my punishment already sufficient? Have I not endured the pangs of starvation while I bounced about in a *sacré* taxicab like an eggshell in a kettle of boiling water? But yes. They are slow of movement at the courthouse, Friend Trowbridge."

"The courthouse? You've been there? What in the world for?"

"For needed information, to be sure," he returned with a smile as he attacked his bouillon with gusto. "I learned much there which may throw light on what we heard this afternoon, *mon vieux.*"

"Yes?"

"Yes, certainly; of course. I discovered, by example, that a Miss Matilda Stiles, who is undoubtlessly the same pious lady of whom the young Glendower told us, passed away a month ago, leaving several sadly disappointed relatives and a last will and testament whereby she names one Mademoiselle Estrella Hudgekins her principal legatee. Furthermore, I discovered that a certain Matilda Stiles, spinster, of this county, did devise by deed, previous to her sad demise, several parcels of excellent valuable real estate in and near the city of Harrisonville to one Timothy Hudgekins and Susanna Hudgekins, his wife, as trustees for Estrella Hudgekins. Furthermore, I found on record several bills of sale whereby numerous articles of intensely valuable personal property—diamonds, antique jewelry, and the like—were conveyed outright by the said Matilda Stiles to the aforesaid Estrella Hudgekins—*parbleu,* already I do mouth the legal jargon unconsciously, so many instruments of transference I have read this afternoon!"

"Well?" I asked.

"No, my friend, it is not well; I damn think it is exceedingly unwell." He helped himself to a generous portion of roast duckling and dressing and refilled his glass with claret. "Attend me, carefully, if you please. The young Monsieur Glendower was to receive in his own right a hundred thousand dollars from his father's estate upon attaining his majority. He passed his twenty-first birthday last month, and already the attorneys have attended to the transfer of the funds. What think you from that?"

"Why, nothing," I returned. "I'd an idea Raymond would succeed to part of the property before his mother's death. Why shouldn't he?"

"*Ah, bah!*" de Grandin replenished his plate and glass and regarded me with an expression of pained annoyance. "Can not you see, my old one? The conclusion leaps to the eye!"

"It may leap to yours," I replied with a smile, "but its visibility is zero, as far as I'm concerned."

2

"YOU two will be the only guests outside the church tonight," Raymond Glendower warned as we drove toward the apartment hotel where the high priestess of the Church of the Heavenly Gnosis resided with her parents, "so if you'll—er—try not to *notice* things too much, you know I'll be awful obliged. You see—er——" he floundered miserably, but

de Grandin came to his rescue with ready understanding.

"Quite so, *mon vieux,*" he agreed. "It is like this: devout members of the Catholic faith are offended when mannerless Protestants enter their churches, stare around as though they were at a museum, and fail to genuflect as they pass the altar; good Protestants take offense when ill-bred Catholics enter their churches and glance around with an air of supercilious disdain, and the Christian visitor gives offense to his Jewish brethren when he removes his hat in their synagogues, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"That's it!" the boy agreed. "You've got the idea exactly, sir."

He leaned forward and was about to embark on another long and tiresome exposition of the excellence of his faith's tenets when the grinding of our brakes announced we had arrived at our destination.

The corridor of the Granada Apartments flashed with inharmonious colors like a kaleidoscope gone crazy, and I shook my head in foreboding. The house was not only screamingly offensive to the eye, it was patently an expensive place in which to live, and the prophetess must draw heavily on her devotees' funds in order to maintain herself in such quarters.

An ornate lift done in the ultra-modernistic manner shot us skyward, and Raymond preceded us down the passage, stopping before a brightly polished bronze door with the air of a worshipper about to enter a shrine. We entered without knocking and found ourselves in a long, narrow hall with imitation stone floor, walls and ceiling. A stone table with an alabaster glow-lamp at its center was the only piece of furniture. A huge mirror let into the wall and surrounded by bronze pegs did duty as a cloak-rack. All in all, the place was about as inviting as a corridor in the penitentiary.

The room beyond, immensely large and almost square in shape, was mellowly lighted by a brass floor-lamp with a shade of perforated metal; its floor was covered with a huge Turkey carpet; the walls were hung with Persian and Chinese rugs. Beneath the lamp, its polished case giving back subdued reflections, like quiet water at night, was a grand piano flanked by two tall Japanese vases filled to overflowing with long-stemmed red roses. Near the opened windows, where the muted roar of the city seeped upward like the crooning of distant waves, was grouped a number of chairs no two of which were mates. Several guests were already seated, talking together in hushed tones like early arrivals at a funeral service.

Oddly, though it was really a most attractive apartment, that rug-strewn room struck a sinister note. Whether it was the superheated atmosphere, the dimly diffused light or the vague reminiscence of incense which mingled with the roses' perfume I do not know, but I had a momentary feeling of panic, a wild desire to seize my companions by the arms and flee before some unseen, evil presence which seemed to brood over the place bound us fast as a spider enmeshes a luckless fly.

Near the piano, where the lamplight fell upon her, stood the high priestess of the cult, Raymond's "Holy Child," and despite my preconceived prejudices, I felt forced to admit the cub had good excuse for his infatuation.

Her extremely décolleté gown of black velvet, entirely devoid of ornamentation, clung to her magnificent figure like the drapery to the Milo Venus and set off her white arms and shoulders in startling contrast. Above the pearl-white expanse of bosom and throat, the perfectly molded shoulders and beautifully turned neck, her face was set like an ivory ikon in the golden nimbus of her hair. She was tall, beautifully made and supple as a mountain lioness. A mediæval master-painter would have joyed in

her physical perfection, but assuredly he would not have painted her with a child at her breast or an aureole surrounding her golden head. No, her beauty was typical of the world, the flesh, and the franker phases of love.

Her upper lip was fluted at the corners as if used to being twisted in a petulant complaint against fate, and her long amber eyes slanting upward at the corners like an Asiatic's, were cold and hard as polished topaz; they seemed to be constantly appraising whatever they beheld. She might have been lovely, as well as beautiful, but for her eyes, but the windows of her soul looked outward only; no one could gaze into them and say what lay behind.

"*Bout d'un rat mort,*" whispered Jules de Grandin in my ear, "this one, she is altogether too good-looking to be entirely respectable, Friend Trowbridge!"

The slow smile with which she greeted Raymond as he bowed almost double before her somehow maddened me. "You poor devil," it seemed to say, "you poor, witless, worshipping Caliban; you don't amount to much, but what there is of your body and soul that's worth having is mine—utterly mine!" Such a smile, I thought, Circe might have given the poor, fascinated man-hogs wallowing and grunting in adoring impotence about her table. As for Raymond, plain, downright adulation brought the tears to his eyes as he all but groveled before her.

As de Grandin and I were led forward for presentation I noted the figures flanking the priestess. They were a man and woman, and as unlovely a pair as one might meet in half a day's walk. The man was like a caricature, bull-necked, bullet-headed, with beetling brows and scrubby, bristle-stiff hair growing low above a forehead of bestial shallowness. Though his face was hard-shaven as an actor's or a priest's, no overlay of barber's powder could hide the wiry beard which struggled through his skin. His evening clothes were well tailored and of the finest goods, but somehow they failed to fit properly, and I had a feeling that a suit of stripes would have been more in place on him.

The woman was like a vicious-minded comic artist's conception of a female politician, short, stocky, apparently heavy-muscled as a man and enormously strong, with a wide, hard mouth and pugnaciously protruding jaw. Her gown, an expensive creation, might have looked beautiful on a dressmaker's lay figure, but on her it seemed as out of place as though draped upon a she-gorilla.

These two, we were made to understand, were the priestess' parents.

Estrella herself spoke no word as de Grandin and I bowed before her, nor did she extend her hand. Serene, statue-still, she stood to receive our mumbled expressions of pleasure at the meeting with an aloofness which was almost contemptuous.

Only for a fleeting instant did her expression change. Something, perhaps the gleam of mockery which lurked in de Grandin's gaze, hardened her eyes for a moment, and I had a feeling that it would behoove the little Frenchman not to turn his back on her if a dagger were handy.

Raymond hovered near his divinity while de Grandin and I proceeded to the next room, where a long sideboard was loaded with silver dishes containing dried fruits, nut-kernels and raisins. The Frenchman sampled the contents of a dish, then made a wry face. "Name of the Devil," he swore, "such vileness should be prohibited by statute!"

"Well?" I asked, nodding questioningly toward the farther room.

"*Parbleu,* no; it is far from such!" he answered. "Of *Mademoiselle la Prêtreuse* I reserve decision till later, but her sire and dam—*mordieu,* were

I a judge, I should find them guilty of murder if they came before me on a charge of chicken-theft! Also, my friend, though their faith may preclude the use of cooked or animal food, unless Jules de Grandin's nose is a great liar, there is nothing in their discipline which forbids the use of liquor, for both of them breathe the aroma of the gin-mill most vilely."

Somewhat later the meeting assumed a slightly more sociable aspect, and we were able to hold a moment's conversation with the prophetess.

"And do you see visions of the ineffable, *Mademoiselle?*" de Grandin asked earnestly. "Do you behold the splendor of heaven in your ecstasies?"

"No," she answered coldly, "my revelations come by symbols. Since I was a little girl I've told my dreams to Mother, and she interprets them for me. So, when I dreamed a little while ago that I stood upon a mountain and felt the wind blowing about me, Mother went into her silence and divined it portended we should journey East to save the people from their sins, for the mountain was the place where we then lived and the wind of my dream was the will of the Divine All, urging me to publish His message to His people."

"And you believe this?" de Grandin asked, but with no note of incredulity in his tone.

"Of course," she answered simply. "I am the latest avatar of the Divine All. Others have come before—Buddha, Mithra, Mohammed, Confucius—but I am the greatest. By woman sin came upon mankind; only by woman can the burden be lifted again. These others, these male hierophants, showed but a part of the way; through me the whole road to everlasting happiness shall be made plain.

"Even when I was a tiny baby the beasts of the field—even the poison serpents of the desert—did reverence to the flame of divinity which burns in me!" She placed her hand proudly on her bosom as she spoke.

"You remember these occasions of adoration?" de Grandin asked in a sort of awed whisper.

"I have been told—my Mother remembers them," she returned shortly as she turned away.

"*Grand Dieu,*" de Grandin murmured, "she believes it, Friend Trowbridge; she has been fed upon this silly pap till she thinks it truth!"

ALL through the evening we had noticed that the guests not only treated Estrella with marked respect, but that they one and all were careful not to let themselves come in contact with her, or even with her clothes. Subconsciously I had noted this, but paid no particular attention to it till it was brought forcibly to my notice.

Among the guests was a little, homely girl, an undersized, underfed morsel of humanity who had probably never in all her life attracted a second glance from any one. Nervous, flutteringly attentive to the lightest syllable let fall by the glorious being who headed the cult, she had kept as close to Estrella as was possible without actually touching her, and as we were preparing to take our departure she came awkwardly between Timothy Hudgekins and his daughter.

Casually, callously as he might have brushed an insect from his sleeve, the man flipped one of his great, gnarled hands outward, all but oversetting the frail girl and precipitating her violently against the prophetess.

The result was amazing. Making no effort to recover her balance, the girl slid to the floor, where she crouched at Estrella's feet in a perfect frenzy of abject terror. "Oh, your Sublimity," she cried, and her words came through blenched lips on

trembling breath, "your High Sublimity, have pity! I did not mean it; I know it is forbidden to so much as touch the hem of your garment without permission, but I didn't mean it; truly, I didn't! I was pushed, I —I——" her words trailed away to soundlessness, and only the rasping of her terrified breath issued from her lips.

"Silence!" the priestess bade in a cold, toneless voice, and her great topaz eyes blazed with tigerish fury. "Silence, Sarah Couvert. Go—go and be forever accursed!"

It was as though a death-sentence had been pronounced. Utter stillness reigned in the room, broken only by the heart-broken sobs of the girl who crouched upon the floor. Every member of the cult, as though actuated by a common impulse, turned his back upon her, and weeping and alone she left the room to find her wraps.

Jules de Grandin would have held her costly evening cloak for her, but she gestured him away and left the apartment with her face buried in her handkerchief.

"*SANG du Diable,* my friend, look at this, *regardez-vous!*" cried de Grandin next morning at breakfast as he thrust a copy of the morning paper across the table.

"COUVERT HEIRESS A SUICIDE"

I read in bold-faced type:

"The body of Miss Sarah Couvert, 28, heiress to the fortune of the late Herman Couvert, millionaire barrel manufacturer, who died in 1919, was found in the river near the Canal street bridge early this morning by Patrolman Aloysius P. Mahoney. The young woman was in evening dress, and it was said at her house when servants were questioned that she had attended a party last night at the apartment of Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Hudgekins in the Granada. When she failed to return from the merrymaking her housekeeper was not alarmed, she said, as Miss Couvert had been spending considerable time away from home lately.

"At the Hudgekins apartment it was said Miss Couvert left shortly before 11 o'clock, apparently in the best of spirits, and her hosts were greatly shocked at learning of her rash act. No reason for her suicide can be assigned. She was definitely known to be in good health."

Then followed an extended account of the career of the genial old Alsatian cooper who had amassed a fortune in the days before national Prohibition decreased the demand for kegs and barrels. The news item ended:

"Miss Couvert was the last of her family, her parents having both predeceased her and her only brother, Paul, having been killed at Belleau Wood in 1918. Unless she left a will disposing of her property, it is said the entire Couvert fortune will escheat to the state."

Reaching into his waistcoat pocket de Grandin removed one of the gold coins which, with the Frenchman's love for "hard money," he always carried.

"This bets the Couvert fortunes are never claimed by the Commonwealth of New Jersey, Friend Trowbridge," he announced, ringing the five-dollar piece on the hot-water dish cover.

He was justified in his wager. Two weeks later Sarah Couvert's will was formally offered for probate. By it she left substantial amounts to all her servants, bequeathed the family mansion and a handsome endowment as a home for working-girls, and left the residuum of the estate, which totaled six figures, to her "dear friend, Estrella Hudgekins."

8

AN UNDERSIZED individual with ears which stood so far from his head that they must have proved a great embarrassment on a windy day perched on the extreme forward edge of his chair and gazed pensively at the top of the brown derby clutched between his knees. "Yes, sir," he answered de Grandin's staccato questions, "me buddy an' me have had th' subject under our eye every minute since you give th' case to th' chief. He wuz to his lawyer's today an' ordered a will drawn, makin' Miss

Hudgekins th' sole legatee; he called her his feeancy."

"You're sure of this?" de Grandin demanded.

"Sure, I'm sure. Didn't I give th' office boy five bucks to let me look at a carbon copy o' th' rough draft o' th' will for five minutes? That sort o' information comes high, sir, an' it'll have to go in on th' expense account."

"But naturally," the Frenchman conceded. "And what of the operative at the Hotel Granada, has she forwarded a report?"

"Sure." The other delved into his inner pocket, ruffled through a sheaf of soiled papers, finally segregated a double sheet fastened with a wire clip. "Here it is. Th' Hudgekinses have been holdin' some sort o' powwow durin' th' last few days; sent th' chicken away to th' country somewhere, an' been doin' a lot o' talkin' an' plannin' behind locked doors. Number Thirty-three couldn't git th' drift o' much o' th' argument, but just before th' young one wuz packed off she heard th' old woman tell her that her latest dream meant Raymond —by which I take it she meant th' young feller we've been shadderin'— has been elected—no, 'selected' wuz th' word—selected to perform th' act o' supreme adoration, whatever that means."

"*Morbleu,* I damn think it means no good!" de Grandin ejaculated, rising and striding restlessly across the room. "Now, have you a report from the gentleman who was to investigate Miss Stiles' case?"

"Sure. She wuz buried by Undertaker Martin, th' coroner, you know. Her maid found her dead in bed, an' rang up Dr. Replier, who'd been attendin' her for some time. He come runnin' over, looked at th' corpse, an' made out a certif'cate statin' she died o' "—he paused to consult his notebook—"o' cardiac insufficiency, whatever that is. Coroner Martin wanted a autopsy on th' case, but on account o' th' old lady's social prominence they managed to talk him out o' it."

"H'm," de Grandin commented non-committally. "Very good, my excellent one, your work is deserving of highest commendation. Should new developments arise, you will advise me at once, if you please."

"Sure," the detective promised as he rose to leave.

"For heaven's sake, what's it all about?" I demanded as the door closed behind the visitor. "What's the idea of having Raymond Glendower and this girl trailed by detectives as if they were criminals?"

"Ha," he laughed shortly. "The young Glendower is a fool for want of judgment; of the young *Mademoiselle,* I do not care yet to say whether she be criminal or not. I hope the best but fear the worst, my friend."

"But why the investigation of Miss Stiles' death? If Replier said she died of cardiac insufficiency, I'm willing to accept that vague diagnosis at face value; he's able, and he's honest as the day is long. If——"

"And therefore he is as likely to be hoodwinked as your own trustful self, *mon vieux,*" the little Frenchman interjected. "Consider, if you please:

"The young Glendower, anxious to impress us with the importance of the converts to this new religion of his, tells us what concerning the death of the old Mademoiselle Stiles? That she died in the very moment of performing 'the act of supreme adoration'.

"Very good. What says the evidence gathered by my men? That she died in her bed at home—at least she was found dead there by her maidservant. Somewhere there is a discrepancy, my friend, a most impressive one. What this act of adoration may be I do not know, nor do I at present very greatly care, but that the excellent deceased lady performed it in her death-bed I greatly doubt. No, my friend, I think she died else-

where and was taken to her home that she might be found dead in her own bed, and her decease therefore considered natural. The fact that she had been ailing of a heart affection for some time, and under treatment by the good Dr. Replier, made the deception so much easier."

"But this is fantastic!" I objected. "We've not one shred of evidence on which to base this theory, and——"

"We have a great sufficiency," he contradicted, "and more will be forthcoming anon. Meantime, if only——"

A vigorous ring at the front doorbell, seconded by a shrill whistle, interrupted him. "Special delivery for Dr. de Grandin," the boy informed me as I answered the summons.

"Quickly, Friend Trowbridge, let me see!" the Frenchman cried as I took the letter from the messenger.

"Ah, *parbleu,*" he glanced quickly through the document, then turned to me triumphantly, "I have them on the hip, my friend! Regard this, if you please; it is the report of the Charred Detective Agency's San Francisco branch. I intrusted them with the task of tracing our friend's antecedents. Read it, if you please."

Taking the paper, I read:

HUDGEKINS, TIMOTHY, alias Frank Hireland, alias William Faust, alias Pat Malone, alias Henry Palmer.

Description: Height 5 feet 8 inches, weight 185 pounds, inclined to stoutness, but not fat, heavily muscled and very strong. Hair, black mixed with gray, very coarse and stiff. Face broad, heavy jaw, arms exceptionally long for his height. Eyes gray.

Was once quite well known locally as prizefighter, later as strong-arm man and bouncer in waterfront saloons. Arrested and convicted numerous times for misdemeanors, chiefly assault and battery. Twice arrested for robbery, but discharged for lack of evidence. Tried on charge of murder (1900) but acquitted for insufficient evidence.

Convicted, 1902, for badger game, in conspiracy with Susanna Hudgekins (see report below), served two years in San Quentin Prison.

Apparently reformed upon release from prison and secured job with railroad as laborer. Industrious, hard worker, well thought of by superiors there. Left job voluntarily in 1910. Not known locally since.

HUDGEKINS, SUSANNA, alias Frisco Sue, alias Annie Rooney, alias Sue Cheney, wife of above.

Description: Short, inclined to stoutness, but very strong for female. Height 5 feet 4 inches, weight about 145 pounds. Hair brown, usually dyed red or bleached. Face broad, very prominent jaw. Eyes brown.

This party was waitress and entertainer in number of music halls prior to marriage to Timothy Hudgekins (see above). Maiden name not definitely known, but believed to be Hopkins. Arrested numerous times for misdemeanors, chiefly drunkenness and disorderly conduct, several times for assault and battery. Was co-defendant in robbery and murder cases involving her husband, as noted above, Acquitted for lack of evidence.

Convicted, 1902, with Timothy Hudgekins, on charge of operating a badger game. Served 1 year in State Reformatory.

Apparently reformed upon discharge from prison. Accompanied husband on job with railroad. Disappeared with him in 1910. Not known locally since.

In 1909 this couple, showing an excellent record for industry and honesty, applied to Bidewell Home for Orphans, Los Angeles, for baby girl. They were most careful in making selection, desiring a very young child, a blond, and one of exceptionably good looks. Said since they were both so ugly, they particularly wanted a pretty child. Were finally granted permission to adopt Dorothy Ericson, 3 months old, orphan without known relatives, child of poor but highly respected Norwegian parents who died in tenement fire two months before. The child lived with her foster parents in railroad camps where they worked, and disappeared when they left the job. Nothing has been heard of her since.

"EXCELLENT, superb; *magnifique!*" he cried exultantly as I finished reading the jerkily worded but complete report. "Behold the *dossier* of these founders of a new religion, these Messiahs of a new faith, my friend!

"Also behold the answer to the puzzle which has driven Jules de Grandin nearly frantic. A lily may grow upon a dung-heap, a rose may rise from a bed of filth, but two apes do not beget a gazelle, nor do carrion crows have doves for progeny. No,

certainly not. I knew it; I was sure of it; I was certain. She could not have been their child, Friend Trowbridge; but this proves the truth of my premonition."

"But what's it all about?" I demanded. "I'm not surprized at the Hudgekins' pedigree—their appearance is certainly against them—nor does the news that the girl's not their child surprize me, but——"

"'But' be everlastingly cooked in hell's most choicely heated furnace!" he interrupted. "You ask what it means? This, *cordieu!*

"In California, that land of sunshine, alkali dust and crack-brained, fool-fostered religious thought, these two cheap criminals, these out-sweepings of the jail, in some way stumbled on a smattering of learning concerning the Eastern philosophies which have set many a Western woman's feet upon the road to madness. Perhaps they saw some monkey-faced, turbaned trickster from the Orient harvesting a crop of golden dollars from credulous old ladies of both sexes who flocked about him as country bumpkins patronize the manipulators of the three cards at county fairs. Although I should not have said they possessed so much shrewdness, it appears they conceived the idea of starting a new religion—a cult of their own. The man who will demand ten signatures upon a promissory note and look askance at you if you tell him of interplanetary distances, will swallow any idle fable, no matter how absurd, if it be boldly asserted and surrounded with sufficient nonsensical mummery and labeled a religion. Very well. These two were astute enough to realize they could not hope to impose on those possessing money by themselves, for their appearance was too much against them. But ah, if they could but come upon some most attractive person—a young girl endowed with charm and beauty, by preference—and put her forward as the prophetess of their cult while they remained in the background to pull the strings which moved their pretty puppet, that would be something entirely different!

"And so they did. Appearing to reform completely, they assumed the guise of honest working-folk, adopted a baby girl with unformed mind whom they trained to work their wicked will from earliest infancy, and—*voilà*, the result we have already seen.

"Poor thing, she sincerely believes that she is not as other women, but is a being apart, sent into the world to lighten its darkness; she stated in guileless simplicity what would be blasphemy coming from knowing lips, and by her charm and beauty she snares those whose wealth has not been sufficient to fill their starved lives. Ah, my friend, youth and beauty are heaven's rarest treasures, but each time God creates a beautiful woman the Devil opens a new page in his ledger. Consider how their nefarious scheme has worked:

"Take the poor little rich Mademoiselle Couvert, by example: Endowed with riches beyond the dream of most, she still lacked every vestige of personal attractiveness, her life had been a dismal routine of emptiness and her starved, repressed soul longed for beauty as a flower longs for sunlight. When the beauteous priestess of this seventy-nine-thousand-times-damned cult deigned to notice her, even called her friend, she was ecstatic in her happiness, and it was but a matter of time till she was induced by flattery to make the priestess her heir by will. Then, deliberately, I believe, that *sale bête*, Hudgekins, pushed her against his daughter, thus forcing her unwittingly to disobey one of the cult's so stupid rules.

"Consider, my friend: We, as physicians, know to what lengths the attraction of woman for woman can go—we see it daily in schoolgirl 'crushes,' usually where a younger woman makes a veritable goddess of an older one. Again, we see it when

one lacking in charm and beauty attaches herself worshipfully to some being endowed with both. To such starved souls the very sight of the adored one is like the touch of his sweetheart's lips to a love-sick youth. They love, they worship, they adore; not infrequently the passion's strength becomes so great as to be clearly a pathological condition. So it was in this case. When Mademoiselle Estrella mouthed the words she had been taught, and bade her worshipper depart from her side, poor Mademoiselle Couvert was overwhelmed. It was as if she had been stricken blind and never more would see the sun; there was nothing left in life for her; she destroyed herself—and her will was duly probated. Yes.

"Very well. What then? We do not know for certain how the old Mademoiselle Stiles came to her death; but I firmly believe it was criminally induced by those vile ones who had secured her signature to a will in their daughter's favor.

"But yes. What next? The young Glendower is not greatly wealthy, but his fortune of a hundred thousand dollars is not to be sneezed upon. Already we have seen how great a fool he has become for love of this beautiful girl. There is nothing he would not do to please her. We know of a certainty he has made his will naming her as sole beneficiary; perchance he would destroy himself, were she to ask it.

"Will she marry him? The hope has been held out, but I think it a vain one. These evil ones who have reaped so rich a harvest through their villainous schemes, they will not willingly permit that their little goose of the golden eggs shall become the bride of a man possessing a mere hundred thousand; besides, that money is already as good as in their pockets. No, no, my friend; the young Glendower is even now in deadly peril. Already I can see their smug-faced lawyer rising to request probate of the will which invests them with his property!"

"But this 'act of supreme adoration' we keep hearing about," I asked, "what can it be?"

"*Précisément,*" he agreed with a vigorous nod. "What? We do not know, but I damn fear it is bound up with the young Glendower's approaching doom, and I shall make it our business to be present when it is performed. *Pardieu,* I shall not be greatly astonished if Jules de Grandin has an act of his own to perform about that time. *Mais oui;* certainly! It might be as well, all things considered, if we were to get in touch with the excellent——"

"Detective Sergeant Costello to see Dr. de Grandin!" Nora McGinnis appeared at the drawing-room door like a cuckoo popping from its clock, and stood aside to permit six feet and several inches of Hibernian muscle, bone and good nature to enter.

"*Eh bien, mon trésor,*" the Frenchman hailed delightedly, "this is most truly a case of speaking of the angels and immediately finding a feather from their wings! In all the city there is no one I more greatly desire to see at this moment than your excellent self!"

"Thanks, Dr. de Grandin, sor," returned the big detective sergeant, smiling down at de Grandin with genuine affection. "'Tis Jerry Costello as can say th' same concernin' yerself, too. Indade, I've a case up me sleeve that won't wur-rk out no ways, so I've come to get ye to help me fit th' pieces together."

"*Avec plaisir,*" the Frenchman replied. "Say on, and when you have done, I have a case for you, too, I think."

4

"WELL, sor," the detective began as he eased his great bulk into an easy-chair and bit the end from the cigar I tendered him, "'tis like this: Last night somethin' after two

o'clock in th' mornin', one o' th' motorcycle squad, a bright lad be th' name o' Stebbins, wuz comin' out of a coffee-pot where he'd been to git a shot o' Java to take th' frost from his bones, when he seen a big car comin' down Tunlaw Street hell-bent fer election. 'Ah ha,' says he, 'this bur-rd seems in a hurry, maybe he'd like to hurry over to th' traffic court wid a ticket,' an' wid that he tunes up his 'cycle an' sets out to see what all th' road-burnin' was about.

" 'Twas a powerful car, sor, an' Stebbins had th' divil's own time keepin' it in sight, but he hung on like th' tail to a dog, drawin' closer an' closer as his gas gits to feedin' good, an' what d'ye think he seen, sor?"

"*Le bon Dieu* knows," de Grandin admitted.

"Th' limousine turns th' corner on two wheels, runnin' down Tuscarora Avenue like th' hammers o' hell, an' draws up before Mr. Marschaulk's house, pantin' like a dog that's had his lights run out. Next moment out leaps a big gorilla of a felly supportin' another man in his arms, an' makes fer th' front door.

" 'What's th' main idea?' Stebbins wants to know as he draws up alongside; 'don't they have no speed laws where you come from?'

"An', 'Sure they do,' answers th' other guy, bold as brass, 'an' they has policemen that's some good to th' public, too. This here's Mr. Marschaulk, an' he's been took mighty bad. I like to burned me motor out gittin' him home, an' if ye'll run fer th' nearest doctor, 'stead o' standin' there playin' wid that book o' summonses, I'll be thinkin' more o' ye.'

"Well, sor, Stebbins is no one's fool, an' he can see wid half an eye that Mr. Marschaulk's in a bad way, so he notes down th' car's number an' beats it down th' street till he sees a doctor's sign, then hammers on th' front door till th' sawbones—askin' yer pardon, gentlemen—comes down to see what its all about.

"They goes over to Marschaulk's in th' All America speed record, sor, an' what do they find?"

"*Dieu de Dieu,* is this a guessing-game?" de Grandin cried testily. "What *did* they find, *mon vieux?*"

"A corpse, sor; a dead corpse, an' nothin' else. Mr. Marschaulk's body had been dumped down in his front hall promiscuous-like, an' th' guy as brought him an' th' car he brought him in had vamoosed. Vanished into thin air, as th' felly says.

"Stebbins had th' license number, as I told ye, an' right away he locates th' owner. It were Mr. Cochran—Tobias A. Cochran, th' banker, sor; an' he'd been in his bed an' asleep fer th' last two hours. Furthermore, he told Stebbins he'd let his Filipino chauffeur go to New York th' day before, an' th' felly wuz still away. On top o' that, when they came to examine th' garage, they found unmistakable evidence it had been burglarized, in fact, th' lock wuz broke clean away."

"U'm," de Grandin murmured, "it would seem Monsieur Cochran is not implicated, then."

"No, sor; aside from his fine standin' in th' community, his alibi's watertight as a copper kettle. But ye ain't heard nothin' yet.

"It were a coroner's case, o' course, an' Mr. Martin didn't let no grass grow under his feet orderin' th' autopsy. They found Mr. Marschaulk had been dead th' better part o' two hours before Stebbins an' th' doctor found him, an' that he died o' mercuric cyanide——"

"*Bon Dieu,* the poisonest of the poisons!" de Grandin ejaculated. "Very good, my friend, what have you found? Has the man been apprehended?"

"He has not, sor, an' that's one reason I'm settin' here this minute. Stebbins wuz so taken up wid gittin' th' car's number an' runnin' fer a

doctor that he didn't git a good look at th' felly. In fact, he never even seen his face, as he kept it down all th' time they wuz talkin'. That seemed natural enough at th' time, too, as he wuz supportin' Mr. Marschaulk on his shoulder, like. Th' most we know about him is he wuz heavy-set, but not fat, wid a big pair o' shoulders an' a voice like a bull-frog singin' in a clump o' reeds."

"And you can find no motive for the killing, whether it be suicide or homicide?"

"That we can't sor. This here now Mr. Marschaulk wuz a harmless sort o' nut, sor; kind o' bugs on religion, from what I've been told. Some time ago he took up wid a new church o' some kind an' has been runnin' wild ever since, but in a harmless way—goin' to their meetin's an' th' like o' that, ye know. It seems like he wuz out wid some o' th' church folks th' very night he died, but when we went to round up th' evidence, we drew a blank there.

"Just a little before ten o'clock he called at Mr. Hudgekins' apartment in th' Granada, but left sometime around eleven by himself. We've th' Hudgekins' word fer it, an' th' elevator boy's an' th' hallman's, too. He'd been there often enough fer them to know him by sight, ye see."

"U'm, and Monsieur and Madame Hudgekins, did they remain at home?" de Grandin asked casually, but there were ominous flashes of cold lightning in his eyes as he spoke.

"As far as we can check up, they did, sor. They say they did, an' we can't find nobody who seen 'em leave, an' about a quarter after twelve Mr. Hudgekins himself called th' office an' asked fer more heat—though why he asked th' saints only know, as 'twas warm as summer last night an' them apartments is heated hot enough to roast a hog."

"*Tête du Diable,*" de Grandin swore, "this spoils everything!"

"How's that, sor?"

"Tell me, my sergeant," the Frenchman demanded irrelevantly, "you interviewed Monsieur and Madame Hudgekins. What is your opinion of them?"

"Well, sor," Costello colored with embarrassment, "do ye want th' truth?"

"But certainly, however painful it may be."

"Well, then, sor, though they lives in a fine house an' wears fine clothes an' acts like a pair o' howlin' swells, if I seen 'em in different circumstances, I'd run 'em in on suspicion an' see if I couldn't make a case later. Th' man looks like a bruiser to me, like a second-rate pug that's managed to git hold of a pot o' money somewhere, an' the' woman—Lord save us, sor, I've run in many a wan lookin' far more respectable when I wuz poundin' a beat in uniform down in th' old second ward!"

"*Bien oui,*" de Grandin chuckled delightedly. "I have not the pleasure of knowing your so delectable second ward, my old one, but I can well guess what sort of neighborhood it was. My sergeant, your intuitions are marvelous. Your inner judgment has the courage to call your sight a liar. Now tell me, how did Mademoiselle Hudgekins impress you?"

"I didn't see her, sor. She were out o' town, an' has been fer some time. I checked that up, too."

"*Barbe d'une anguille,* this is exasperating!" de Grandin fumed. "It is 'stalemate' at every turn, *parbleu!*"

"Oh, you're obsessed with the idea the Hudgekins are mixed up in this!" I scoffed. "It's no go, old fellow. Come, admit you're beaten, and apply yourself to trying to find what Marschaulk did and where he went after leaving the Granada last night."

"I s'pose ye're right, Dr. Trowbridge, sor," Sergeant Costello admitted sorrowfully, "but I'm wid Dr. de Grandin; I can't get it out o' me nut that that pair o' bur-rds had sumpin

to do wid pore old Marschaulk's death, or at least know more about it than they're willin' to admit."

"*Hélas*, we can do nothing here," de Grandin added sadly. "Come, Friend Sergeant, let us visit the good Coroner Martin; we may find additional information. Trowbridge, *mon vieux*, I shall return when I return; more definite I can not be."

I WAS finishing a solitary breakfast when he fairly bounced into the room, his face drawn with fatigue, but a light of elation shining in his little blue eyes. "*Triomphe*—or at least progress!" he announced as he dropped into a chair and drained a cup of coffee in three gigantic gulps. "Attend me with greatest care, my friend:

"Last night the good Costello and I repaired to Coroner Martin's and inspected the relics of the lamented Monsieur Marschaulk. Thereafter we journeyed to the Hotel Granada, where we found the same people on duty as the night before. A few questions supplied certain bits of information we had not before had. By example, we proved conclusively that those retainers of the house remembered not what they had done, but what they thought they had done. They all insisted it would have been impossible for anyone to have left the place without being seen by them, but anon it developed that just before eleven o'clock there rose a great cloud of smoke in the alley which flanks the apartment, and one and all they went to investigate its source. Something smoked most vilely in the middle of the passageway, and when they went too near they found it stung their eyes so they were practically blinded. Now, during that short interval, they finally admitted, it would have been possible for one to slip past them, through the passage on the side street and be out of sight before they realized it. Much can be accomplished in a minute, or even half a minute, by one who is fleet of foot and has his actions planned, my friend."

"Yes, that's all very well," I conceded, "but you're forgetting one thing. How could Hudgekins call up and demand more heat at twelve o'clock if he had sneaked out at eleven? Do you contend that he crept back into the house while they were looking at another smoke screen? If he did, he must have worked the trick at least four times in all, since you seem to think it was he who brought Marschaulk's body home and stole Cochran's car to do it."

He looked thoughtfully at the little disk of bubbles forming above the lump of sugar he had just dropped into his third cup of coffee. "One must think that over," he admitted. "Re-entrance to the house after two o'clock would not have been difficult, for the telephone girl quits work at half-past twelve, and at one the hallman locks the outer doors and leaves, while the lift man goes off duty at the same time and the car is thereafter operated automatically by push buttons. Each tenant has a key to the building so belated arrivals can let themselves in or out as they desire."

"But the telephone call," I insisted; "you haven't explained that yet."

"No," he agreed, "we must overcome that; but it does not destroy my theory, even though it might break down a prosecution in court.

"Consider this: After leaving the hotel, we returned to see Monsieur Martin, and I voiced my suspicions that Mademoiselle Stiles' death needed further explanation. Monsieur Martin agreed.

"Thereupon the good Costello and I resorted to a *ruse de guerre*. We told all we knew concerning Monsieur Marschaulk's death, but suppressed all mention of that *sacré* telephone call.

"My friend, we were successful.

Entirely so. At our most earnest request Monsieur Martin forthwith ordered exhumation of Mademoiselle Stiles' body. In the dead of night we disentombed her and took her to his mortuary. It was hard to get Parnell, the coroner's physician, from his bed, for he is a lazy swine, but at last we succeeded in knocking him up and forced him to perform a post-mortem examination. My friend, *Matilda Stiles was done to death; she was murdered!*"

"You're crazy!" I told him. "Dr. Replier's certificate stated——"

"*Ah bah,* that certificate, it is fit only to light the fire!" he cut in. "Listen: In Mademoiselle Stiles' mouth, and in her stomach, too, we did find minute, but clearly recognizable traces of Hg(CN) — mercuric cyanide! I repeat, Friend Trowbridge, she was murdered, and Jules de Grandin will surely lay her slayers by the heels. Yes."

"But——"

The shrill, insistent summons of the 'phone bell interrupted my protest.

The call was for de Grandin, and after a moment's low conversation he hung up, returning to the breakfast room with grimly set mouth. "*L'heure zéro* strikes tonight, Friend Trowbridge," he announced gravely. "That was the excellent detective I have had on young Glendower's trail. He reports they have just intercepted a conversation the young man had by telephone with Mademoiselle Estrella. He is to make the 'act of supreme adoration' this night."

"But what can we do?" I asked, filled with vague forebodings despite my better judgment. "If——"

"*Eh bien,* first of all we can sleep; at least, *I* can," he answered with a yawn. "*Morbleu,* I feel as though I could slumber round the clock—but I will thank you to have me called in time for dinner, if you please."

5

"*ALLO?*" de Grandin snatched the telephone from its hook as the bell's first warning tinkle sounded. "You say so? It is well; we come forthwith, instantly, at once!"

Turning to Costello and me he announced: "The time is come, my friends; my watcher has reported the young Glendower but now left his house en route for the Hudgekins' dwelling. Come, let us go."

Hastening into our outdoor clothes we set out for the Granada and were hailed by the undersized man with the oversized ears as we neared the hotel. "He went in ten minutes ago," the sleuth informed us, "an' unless he's got wings, he's still there."

"*Eh bien,* then we remain here," de Grandin returned, nestling deeper into the folds of the steamer rug he had wrapped about him.

Half an hour passed, an hour, two; still Raymond Glendower lingered. "I'm for going home," I suggested as a particularly sharp gust of the unseasonably cold spring wind swept down the street. "The chances are Raymond's only paying a social call anyway, and——"

"*Tiens,* if that be true, his sociability is ended," de Grandin interrupted. "Behold, he comes."

Sure enough, young Glendower emerged from the hotel, a look of such rapt inattention on his face as might be worn by a bridegroom setting out for the church.

I leaned forward to start the motor, but the Frenchman restrained me. "Wait a moment, my friend," he urged. "The young *Monsieur's* movements will be watched by sharper eyes than ours, and it is of the movements of Monsieur and Madame Hudgekins I would take note at this time."

Again we entered on a period of waiting, but this time our vigil was not so long. Less than half an hour after Raymond left the hotel a light

delivery truck drove up to the Granada's service entrance and two men in overalls and jumper alighted. Within a few minutes they returned, bearing between them a long wooden box upholstered in coarse denim. Apparently the thing was the base of a combination couch and clothes-chest, but from the slow care with which its bearers carried it, it might have been filled with something fragile as glass and heavy as lead.

"U'm," de Grandin twisted viciously at the tips of his tightly waxed wheat-blond mustache, "my friends, I damn think I shall try an experiment. Trowbridge, *mon ami*, do you remain here. Sergeant, will you come with me?"

They crossed the street, entered the corner drug-store and waited something like five minutes. The Frenchman was elated, the Irishman thoughtful as they rejoined me. "Three times we did attempt to get the Hudgekins apartment by telephone," de Grandin explained with a satisfied chuckle, "and three times Mademoiselle the Central Operator informed us the line did not answer and returned our coin. Now, Friend Trowbridge, do you care to hazard a guess what the contents of that box we saw depart might have been?"

"You mean——"

"Perfectly; no less. Our friends the Hudgekins lay snugly inside that coffin-like box, undoubtlessly grinning like cats fed on cheese and thumbing their noses at the attendants in the hotel lobby. Tomorrow those innocent ones will swear upon a pile of Bibles ten meters high that neither the amiable Monsieur Hudgekins nor his equally amiable wife left the place. More, I will wager they will solemnly affirm Monsieur or Madame Hudgekins called the office by 'phone and demanded more steam in the radiators!"

"But they can't do that," I protested. "There's an inside 'phone in the house, and a call made from an instrument outside would not be taken over one of the house 'phones. They couldn't——"

My argument was cut short by the approach of a nondescript individual who touched his hat to de Grandin. "He's gone to 487 Luxor Road," this person announced, "an' Shipley just 'phoned a furniture wagon drove up an' two birds lugged a hell of a heavy box up th' stairs to th' hall.

"Oh, sure," he nodded in response to the Frenchman's admonition. "We'll call their apartment every fifteen minutes from now till you tell us to lay off."

"*Très bien*," de Grandin snapped. "Now, Friend Trowbridge, to 487 Luxor Road, if you please. Sergeant, you will come as soon as possible?"

"You betcha," Costello responded as he swung from the car and set off toward the nearest police station.

IT WAS an unsavory neighborhood through which Luxor Road ran, and the tumble-down building which was number 487 was the least respectable-appearing to be found in a thoroughly disreputable block. In days before the war the ground floor had housed a saloon, and its proprietors or their successors had evidently nourished an ambition to continue business against the form of the statute in such case made and provided, for pasted to the grimy glass of the window was a large white placard announcing that the place was closed by order of the United States District Court, and a padlock and hasp of impressive proportions decorated the principal entrance. Another sign, more difficult to decipher, hung above the doorway to the upper story, announcing that the hall above was for rent for weddings, lodges and select parties.

Up the rickety stairs leading to this dubious apartment de Grandin led the way.

The landing at the stairhead was dark as Erebus; no gleam of light

seeped under the door which barred the way, but the Frenchman tiptoed across the dusty floor and tapped timidly on the panels. Silence answered his summons, but as he repeated the hail the door swung inward a few inches and a hooded figure peered through the crack. "Who comes," the porter whispered, "and why have ye not the mystic knock?"

"*Morbleu*, perhaps this knock will be more greatly to your liking?" the Frenchman answered in a low, hard whisper, as his blackjack thudded sickeningly on the warder's hooded head.

"Assist me, my friend," he ordered in a low breath, catching the man as he toppled forward and easing him to the floor. "So. Off with his robe while I make sure of his good behavior with these." The snap of handcuffs sounded, and in a moment de Grandin rose, donned the hooded mantle he had stripped from the unconscious man, and tiptoed through the door.

We felt our way across the dimly lighted anteroom beyond and parted a pair of muffling curtains to peer into a lodge hall some twenty feet wide by fifty long. Flickering candles burning in globes of red and blue glass gave the place illumination which was just one degree less than darkness. Near us was a raised platform or altar approached by three high steps carpeted with a drugget on which were worked designs of a triangle surrounding an opened eye, one of the emblems appearing on the lift of each step. Upon the altar itself stood two square columns painted a dull red and surmounted by blue candles at least two inches thick, which burned smokily, diluting, rather than dispelling, the surrounding darkness. Each column was decorated with a crudely daubed picture of a cockerel equipped with three human legs, and behind the platform was a reredos bearing the device of two interlaced triangles enclosing an opened eye and surrounded by two circles, the outer red, the inner blue. Brazen pots of incense stood upon each step, and from their perforated conical caps poured forth dense clouds of sweet, almost sickeningly perfumed smoke.

Facing the altar on two rows of backless benches sat the congregation, each so enveloped in a hooded robe that it was impossible to distinguish the face, or even the sex of various individuals.

Almost as de Grandin parted the curtains a mellow-toned gong sounded three deep, admonitory notes, and, preceded by a blue-robed figure and followed by another in robes of scarlet, Estrella Hudgekins entered the room from the farther end. She was draped in some sort of garment of white linen embroidered in blue, red and yellow, the costume seeming to consist of a split tunic with long, wide-mouthed sleeves which reached to the wrists. The skirt, if such it could be called, depended forward from her shoulders like a clergyman's stole, and while it screened the fore part of her body, it revealed her nether limbs from hip to ankle at every shuffling step. Behind, it hung down like a loose cloak, completely veiling her from neck to heels. Upon her head was a tall cap of starched white linen shaped something like a bishop's miter and surmounted by a golden representation of the triangle enclosing the opened, all-seeing eye. Beneath the cap her golden hair had been smoothly brushed and parted, and plaited with strings of rubies and of pearls, the braids falling forward over her shoulders and reaching almost to her knees.

As she advanced into the spot of luminance cast by the altar candles we saw the reason for her sliding, shuffling walk. Her nude, white feet were shod with sandals of solid gold consisting of soles with exaggeratedly upturned toes and a single metallic instep strap, making it impossible for

her to retain the rigid, metallic footgear and lift her feet even an inch from the floor.

Just before the altar her escort halted, ranging themselves on each side of her, and like a trio of mechanically controlled automata, they sank to their knees, crossed their hands upon their breasts and lowered their foreheads to the floor. At this the congregation followed suit, and for a moment utter quiet reigned in the hall as priestess and votaries lay prostrate in silent adoration.

Then up she leaped, cast off her golden shoes, and advancing to the altar's lowest step, began a stamping, whirling dance, accompanied only by the rhythmic clapping of the congregation's hands. And as she danced I saw a cloud of fine, white powder dust upward from the rug and fall like snow on marble upon the whiteness of her feet.

"*Ah?*" breathed Jules de Grandin in my ear, and from his tone I knew he found the answer to something which had puzzled him.

The dance endured for possibly five minutes, then ended sharply as it had commenced, and like a queen ascending to her throne, Estrella mounted the three steps of the altar, her powder-sprinkled feet leaving a trail of whitened prints on the purple carpet as she passed.

"Come forth, O chosen of the Highest; advance, O happiest of the servants of the One," chanted one of the cowled figures who had escorted the priestess. "You who have been chosen from among the flock to make the Act of Supreme Adoration; if you have searched your soul and found no guile therein, advance and make obeisance to the Godhead's Incarnation!"

There was a fluttering of robes and a craning of hooded heads toward the rear of the hall as a new figure advanced from the shadows. He was all in spotless linen like the priestess, but as he strode resolutely forward we saw the smock-like garment which enveloped him was drawn over his everyday attire.

"*Morbleu,*" de Grandin murmured, "I have it; it is easier that way! Dressing a corpse is awkward business, while stripping the robe from off a body is but an instant's work. Yes."

"Forasmuch as our brother Raymond has purified and cleansed his body by fasting and his mind and soul by meditation, and has made petition to the All-Highest for permission to perform the Act of Supreme Adoration, know ye all here assembled that it is the will of the Divine All, as manifested in a vision vouchsafed His priestess and Incarnation, that His servant be allowed to make the trial," the hooded master of ceremonies announced in a deep, sepulchral voice.

Turning to Raymond, he cautioned: "Know ye, my brother, that there is but one in all the earth deemed fitting to pass this test. The world is large, its people many; dost thou dare? Bethink you, if there be but one small taint of worldliness in your most secret thoughts, your presumption in offering yourself as life-mate to the priestess is punishable by death of body and everlasting annihilation of soul, for it has been revealed that many shall apply and only one be chosen."

To the congregation he announced: "If the candidate be a woman and pass the test, then shall the priestess cleave unto her so long as she shall live, and be forever her companion. If he be a man, he may ask her hand in marriage, and she may not refuse him. But if he fail, death shall be his portion. Is it the law?"

"It is the law!" chanted the assembly in one voice.

"And dost thou still persist in thy trial?" the hooded one demanded, turning once more to Raymond. "Remember, already two have tried and been found wanting, and the wrath

of the Divine All smote and withered them, even as they performed the act of adoration. Dost *thou* dare?"

"I do!" said Raymond Glendower as his eyes sought the lovely, smiling eyes of the white-robed priestess.

"It is well. Proceed, my son. Make thou the Act of Supremest Adoration, and may the favor of the Divine All accompany thee!"

IT WAS deathly silent in the room as Raymond Glendower dropped upon his knees and crept toward the altar steps. Only the sigh of quickly indrawn breath betrayed the keyed emotion of the congregation as they leaned forward to see a man gamble with his life as forfeit.

Arms outstretched to right and left, head thrown back, body erect, the priestess stood, a lovely, cruciform figure between the flickering candles as her lover crept slowly up the altar steps.

At the topmost step he paused, kneeled erect a moment, then placed his hands palm downward each side the priestess' feet.

"Salute!" the hooded acolyte cried. "Salute with lips and tongue the feet of her who is the living shrine and temple of the Most High, the Divine All. Salute the Ivory-footed Incarnation of our God!"

Lips pursed as though to kiss a holy thing, Raymond Glendower bent his head above Estrella's ivory insteps, but:

"My hands, beloved, not my feet!" she cried, dropping her arms before her and holding out her hands, palm forward, to his lips.

"*Mordieu,*" de Grandin whispered in delight. "Love conquers all, my friend, even her mistaught belief that she is God's own personal representative!"

"Sacrilege!" roared the hooded man. "It is not so written in the law! 'Tis death and worse than death for one who has not passed the test to touch the priestess' hands!"

A shaft of blinding light, gleaming as the sunlight, revealing as the glow of day, shot through the gloom and lighted up the hate-distorted features of Timothy Hudgekins beneath the monk's-hood of the robe he wore. "Sacrilege it is, *parbleu,* but it is you who make it!" de Grandin cried as he focused his flashlight upon the master of ceremonies and advanced with a slow, menacing stride across the temple's floor.

"*You?*" Hudgekins cried. "You rat, you nasty little sneak, I'll break every bone——"

He launched himself on Jules de Grandin with a bellow like an infuriated bull.

The slender Frenchman crumpled like a broken reed beneath the other's charge, then straightened like a loosed steel spring, flinging Hudgekins sprawling face downward upon the carpet where the priestess had performed her dance.

"*À moi, Sergent; à moi, les gendarmes;* I have them!" he cried, and the stamping of thick-soled boots, the inpact of fist and nightstick on hooded heads, mingled with the cries, curses and lamentations of the congregation of the Church of the Heavenly Gnosis as Costello led his platoon of policemen in the raid.

"Susanna Hudgekins, alias Frisco Sue, alias Annie Rooney, alias Sue Cheney, alias only the good God alone knows what else, I charge you with conspiracy to kill and murder Raymond Glendower, and with having murdered by conspiracy Matilda Stiles and Lawson Marschaulk—look to her, Sergeant," de Grandin cried, pointing a level finger at the second hooded form which had accompanied the priestess to the altar.

"What'll we do wid th' he one an' th' gur-rl, sor?" Costello asked as he clasped a pair of handcuffs on Susanna Hudgekins' wrists.

"The man——" de Grandin began, then:

"*Grand Dieu,* behold him!"

Timothy Hudgekins lay where he had fallen, his face buried in the deep-piled, powder-saturated carpet on which the priestess had danced. A single glance told us he was dead.

"I damn think the city mortuary would be his last abiding-place—till he fills a felon's grave," de Grandin announced callously. "He is caught in his own pitfall."

To me he explained: "When I flung the filthy beast from me his vile face did come in contact with that carpet which was saturated in cyanide of mercury. It was on that they made their poor, deluded dupe dance till her feet were covered with the powdered poison; then he who kissed and licked them perished instantly. So died Mademoiselle Stiles and so died Monsieur Marschaulk, and, *grâce à Dieu,* the poison he spread for the young Glendower has utterly destroyed that vile reptile of the name of Hudgekins. Half stunned from his fall, he breathed the deadly powder in, it dusted on his lips and swept into his mouth. So he died. I am very pleased to see it."

"What about th' gur-rl, sor?" Costello reminded.

"Nothing," de Grandin returned shortly. "She is innocent, my friend, the dupe and tool of those wicked ones. Should you seek her for questioning anon, I think you will find her in Monsieur Glendower's custody, by all appearances."

We turned with one accord toward the altar. In the light of the guttering candles Raymond Glendower and Dorothy Ericson, whom we had known as Estrella Hudgekins, were locked in each other's arms, and kissing each other on the lips, as lovers were meant to kiss.

"CERTAINLY, Mr. Hudgekins called the office," the Granada telephone girl answered de Grandin's query. "Just a few minutes after twelve o'clock he called and asked us to send up more heat."

"Did he now?" Costello asked. "Bedad, he's some guy, that felly, ain't he, Dr. de Grandin, sor?"

"You called the Hudgekins apartment at intervals?" de Grandin asked the sleuth we'd left to watch the hotel.

"Sure," that worthy replied. "Every fifteen minutes, regular as clockwork. Always got th' same answer: 'Yer party doesn't answer,' an' by th' way, sir, all them nickels I spent to call will have to go in on th' expense account."

"But of course, cert——" de Grandin began, then: "Thief, cheat, robber, *voleur!* Would you make a monkey of me? How comes it you would charge for calls you could not make?"

The detective grinned sheepishly, and de Grandin patted his shoulder with a smile. "*Eh bien, mon petit brave,*" he relented, "here is five dollars; will that perhaps cover the total of those nickels you did not spend?"

Costello leading, we entered the Hudgekins' elaborate suite. One glance about the living-room, and the Frenchman shouted with glee. "Look, behold, see, admire!" he ordered triumphantly. "Laugh at my face now, Friend Trowbridge, ask me again to explain those *sacré* 'phone calls!"

Before the telephone was an ingenious device. A mechanical arm was fastened to the receiver, while in front of the mouthpiece was a funnel-shaped horn connected with a phonograph sound-box and needle which rested on a wax cylinder. The whole was actuated by clockwork, and the lever releasing the springs was attached to the bell-clapper of a large alarm clock set for fifteen minutes after twelve.

Stooping, de Grandin turned the clock's hands back. As they reached a quarter past twelve there was a light buzzing sound, the arm lifted the receiver from its hook, and in a moment a deep, gruff voice we all

recognized spoke into the mouthpiece: "Hullo, this is Mr. Hudgekins. Please have the engineer send more heat up. Our apartment is cold as ice." A pause, during which a courteous hotel official might have assured the tenant his wants would be attended to, then: "Thank you, very much. Good-night."

"Well"—Costello stared open-mouthed at the mechanism which would have provided an unshakable alibi in any criminal court—"well, sors, I'll be damned!"

"Undoubtlessly you will, unless you mend your ways," de Grandin agreed with a grin. "Meantime, as damnation is a hot and thirsty business, I vote we adjourn to Friend Trowbridge's and absorb a drink."

A Pathetic Little Story Is

Across the Hall

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

"DAMN!"

Rodney Market threw his pen to the floor. In so doing, he turned his head slightly, and saw a vision in white possessed of the threshold of his room. He turned. The girl stood with raised eyebrows, staring severely at him. Her head was turned a little to one side; cocked, one might almost say.

"Oh! pardon me. I wasn't aware that I had a visitor. Not really. You're Miss . . . Miss . . . "

She did not volunteer to help him out.

"Miss . . . from across the hall," he finished lamely.

She nodded almost imperceptibly. He waited for her to say something.

"I've got to write a letter."

He looked at her. She was perfectly serious; a frown had jumped into being on her forehead.

"I've got to write a letter," she said again, as if she had not said it before. "Got to," she repeated for emphasis.

"Is it imperative?" he asked, smiling.

"Got to," she said again, making a queer, mad movement with her free hand; Rodney noticed now that she held a pen in one of her pale, white hands.

"What's the matter? Bad pen, or something?"

"No ink."

"Won't you come in and sit down for a few minutes?"

"No. I've got to write a letter."

"Perhaps I can find you some ink. Will red ink do?" he asked, looking askance at the bottle on his desk.

"Oh! no. I shouldn't wish to write in red ink. Would you?" She made a wry grimace with her face.

Rodney shook his head. "Blue, then," he said. "The color of your eyes. Surely blue will do!"

"Yes, blue will do. Blue."

Rodney Market got the ink-bottle out of his drawer and proffered it. She made no step toward him. Instead she held the pen out and stood

looking expectantly at him. There was an awkward pause. He walked over to her; standing before her, the bottle held in one hand, the cork in the other, he watched her dip her pen into the ink.

"Hadn't you better take the bottle? You'll be out of ink again before long."

"Oh! no. This will do. Thank you very much."

Without another word she crossed the hall and vanished into the room opposite his. He stood looking after her. He could not remember when he had seen such an appealing girl.

The night was oppressively hot. He went back to his desk and began again the task at which he had been working when the girl came. He wondered half-consciously what her name was; he was not aware that there was a roomer across the hall. He had been in this room only three days, and hadn't yet gotten the chance to acquaint himself with his surroundings, least of all his fellow tenants. He thought that he would like to know the girl better. Suddenly a low cough from the door interrupted him. The girl was standing there, holding out her pen.

"I've got to finish the letter." She smiled and looked meaningly at the bottle before him. There was just an edge of fright in her voice, which escaped Rodney at first. He smiled in return and took up the ink-bottle.

"Why didn't you take the bottle? I won't have any need of it until tomorrow anyway. I can call for it then," he added as an afterthought.

"No," she said. "I don't want the bottle; I just want a little ink. It's just a short letter . . . just a short one. I'm sure I didn't think I'd need more than just one pen of ink. I'm sorry. . . . "

He went over to her again with the bottle and stood admiring her while she dipped her pen into the ink. He would have to get the landlady to introduce him to her in the morning. He felt an instinctive liking for her; he could not help hoping that she would reciprocate it. She turned her face upward.

"Thank you again. I hate to bother you . . . but I've simply got to finish that letter."

She moved across the hall again, a little slower this time. At her door she turned her head.

"Good-night."

"Good-night," he answered, and smiled.

He went back into his room and left the door open again, hoping vaguely that she would need more ink. He sat down to begin a letter of his own. He wrote slowly and laboriously, "May 17, 1928;" then his pen balked again, and he threw it from him with an exclamation of disgust. He turned toward the door again and again, half expecting to see the girl there, but he was disappointed, for she did not again appear. At last he retired, thinking of her, already beginning to build air castles about her.

In the morning when he awoke, his first thought was of her. He got into his clothes as hastily as he could, and went hurriedly to the bathroom, hoping to see the girl on the way. But no; he saw nothing of her, though he lingered as long as he dared. He sat down and waited for the landlady, who usually came up the stairs at about eleven o'clock; he could always tell when she came, for she had a habit of dragging her broom after her; he could always recognize the sound. When at last she came, he stood in the hall waiting.

"Good morning, Mrs. Simpson."

"Good morning."

He fumbled awkwardly.

"Nice morning."

"Fine."

He turned to go back into his room.

"Oh! by the way, Mrs. Simpson, I'd like to ask a favor of you. Might I?"

"Ask away."

"Could you . . . would you intro-

duce me to the girl who rooms across the hall?"

For a moment the landlady frowned; then she started to laugh.

"Girl across the hall? What did you have for supper last night that made you dream that? There's not a girl rooming in this house."

"Oh! but I say . . . but I saw her. She came to get ink from me twice last night."

"Nonsense. Come on, I'll show you."

The landlady fumbled among her keys for a moment; then she stepped across the hall and unlocked the door of the room. He walked into the room after the landlady.

"Look," she said. "Empty! Has been for nearly ten years."

The room was bare of furniture, except for a rickety table off to one side. Close to it, down on the floor, he saw a yellow scrap of paper, closely folded. The landlady paid no attention to him. He went over toward the table and picked up the scrap of paper. Then he noticed the pen on the dust-covered table. It was very old, but there was a curiously fresh blue discoloration on the rusty steel point.

He opened the paper hurriedly. There were three lines written on it in a neat feminine hand. The last line was broken off in the middle, as if the pen had gone dry. Below the last line were several oddly cryptic scrawls, as if someone had added to the paper at a later date. He read the letter:

> Dearest Mark:
> Why didn't you send me the money I asked for? It wasn't much. I've got to have it; got to . . .

Then he looked up at the date, and was half conscious of the landlady calling him from the threshold. He started from the room, holding the paper tightly in his hand.

The letter was dated "May 17, 1908."

"Once had a girl there," the landlady was saying as he stepped into the hall. "But she had a bit of bad luck. A man, I suspected. . . . Darn this lock! It always gives me trouble."

Rodney stepped forward mechanically. He started to turn the key. "What happened to her?" he asked in an undertone.

"The girl? Oh! she killed herself. Prussic acid, the doctor said."

The BLACK MONARCH

BY · PAUL · ERNST

"They were shaken like a stick in a whirlpool."

DUAK

The Story Thus Far

IN HIS distant laboratory Professor Eden photographs and locates a hitherto unsuspected evil genius who rules the world from an underground palace in North Africa. At his death he sends his adopted son, Professor Sanderson, on a crusade against him. Sanderson joins forces with Neal Emory, whose father has been murdered by the machinations of the Black Monarch. They enter the Black Kingdom and find a race of automatons ruled by the despot, Rez. They are captured and brought to the throneroom of Rez, who speaks to them through the voice of a beautiful girl, who lies apparently lifeless beside a great blue disk. Rez taunts them with their helplessness, demonstrates his miraculous scientific abilities, and reduces Neal to an automaton by a drug which steals away his mind. He reserves Sanderson for a surgical operation to reduce him to the same condition. Sanderson, realizing that the disk is the source of Rez's power, instructs Neal how to break the disk, and orders him to strike, carefully concealing his thoughts from Rez the while, so that the monster can not read his intention.

15. The End of the Quest

THE fraction of a second that followed Sanderson's command seemed hours long. He gazed imploringly at Neal from the corner of his eye. Would he remember the desperate rehearsals in the prison rooms below? And if he did remember—would he be able to move in obedience? Or was he still held by the mental grip of Rez? In all this time he had not moved a finger. Was it because he could not?

In the next instant, even as Rez wheeled to stare at them with his chill

eyes, he received the answer to his agonized questions.

Whether it was that Rez was actually powerless to bind mentally a man in Neal's present state of mindlessness, or whether he had been too sure of Neal's docile harmlessness, will never be known. The fact remained that Neal could move. And, at the rehearsed word of command, move he did!

He stooped to pick up the metal bench that was beside them. Bearing it in his arms, he walked placidly but swiftly toward the diamond disk.

He swung the bench back to the full length of his arms. Behind him Rez was bounding over the stretch of floor. Just as the great figure leaped at him, Neal crashed the metal bench squarely into the center of the disk.

An instant later he was flung against the wall, but Rez had been too late. The curtain behind the disk bellied a moment under the weight of the dozen fragments of the shattered jewel, then straightened as the pieces fell to the floor. With hands spread at his sides in a gesture of impotence and dismay, Rez surveyed the wreck of his disk. Then, slowly, he turned to face Sanderson.

For a dozen seconds light gray eyes stared from spiky black beard, and chill, distorted ones peered from metal helmet—to clash in cold ferocity.

Then Sanderson moved his great arms tentatively. He flexed the muscles of legs and back, and experimentally took a few steps to see if he were completely free from the spell of Rez. He was. He could move with ease—and before him, no longer protected by the hypnotic power of the diamond, was his unearthly enemy.

"And now," he rumbled, his eyes fixed on the vulnerable airhole in the base of the muscular throat, "we will see whether my lifelong training has been for nothing!"

LIKE two great panthers they sidled slowly and alertly about each other. Sanderson, ever watching the chill eyes behind the thick lenses, came a little closer and sought for an opening. He assumed the other was doing the same. In a moment he was aware of his error—Rez jumped away from him and toward the curtained door.

Immediately Sanderson was after him. Above all things he must not be allowed to leave the room and enlist the help of his guards. At the very doorway he caught up with him and smashed out with his fist. His doubled hand crashed against the metal hood. A streak of pain told him he'd broken a finger. But Rez staggered back from the entrance, plainly dazed by the impact against his metal skull, and in that instant Sanderson caught a heavy table and pulled it in front of the door. A poor barrier, but it would impede the other for the few seconds necessary to stop him should he try to leave the chamber again.

As he turned from the task Rez was upon him, and for the first time he felt his superhuman strength to the full. Enormous hands closed around his throat. A great leg was curved around his own legs. He felt himself lifted clear of the floor and dashed down again. But in his fall he clutched at the broad belt around the other's waist, and when he fell Rez fell too.

Both were up almost as soon as they had touched the floor, and again they circled warily about each other; while from the corner where he had been flung after breaking the disk, Neal watched the two giants with round, bewildered eyes.

As the two gazed at each other, seeking for another opening, Sanderson was frantically trying to beat down a weakness resulting from an unexpected thing—the feel of the skin of Rez! In their brief grapple his hands had recoiled involuntarily from

further touch. It was nauseating, the feel of that scaly, hairless skin—so repulsive that he felt faint from the momentary contact.

While he wavered in his indecision, Rez was upon him again. He was thrown to the rock floor under the crash of the meeting, and on him was the great weight of Rez. Just above him was the airhole at the base of the metal helmet. He could feel the air sucking in and blowing out as it fed the panting lungs.

He wrenched his right arm free and, at the same instant as fingers shut around his own throat, pressed his hand down over the airhole. In the clutch of those great hands he was shaken like a child, but he kept his palm tenaciously over the airhole till he felt the other's grip slacken a trifle. Then he arched his knees under him, kicked out with all his strength, and was free.

A section of the rough white drapery was torn from the wall as Rez clutched it to steady himself. With it came two of the crossed javelins hung there in ornament. Rez snatched up one of these, held it close to the blade like a short-sword, and charged Sanderson.

With a writhe of his body Sanderson eluded the thrust, but a twinge in his side and the feel of something warm trickling over his skin told him how slight had been his escape. As the other's hand was raised for a second blow, he caught the descending wrist and checked it. Then he groped for the airhole, but his own wrist was grasped with a force that numbed his arm.

The strength of Rez surpassed even his own enormous muscular power, as he was soon to learn. In spite of his utmost effort, the hand that held the javelin was pressed lower and lower, while he was held powerless to check its advance or tear himself free. Down it crept, an inch at a time, until it was within a few inches of his chest. Then he caught a side glimpse of Neal, who was watching them with child-like wonder.

"Neal!" he gasped. "Help me! Hit his helmet with something!"

Neal stared about him, obviously in search of something with which to carry out orders.

"Your sandal——"

The point of the javelin was very near him now.

Mechanically Neal took off one sandal and approached with the light metal thing in his hand. Rez swung the body of Sanderson as a shield between them, but a moment later Neal reached around and swung the sandal at the cylindrical hood.

Sanderson tore loose from the weakened grip of his antagonist but was not quick enough to prevent his next move.

Rez wheeled toward Neal, who was standing defenseless save for his sandal, his arms swinging harmlessly at his side—and crashed his fist against his head just above the ear. Neal went down against the wall with his legs crumpled under him like a broken doll.

With his back toward the doorway, Sanderson moved toward Rez, but stopped uncertainly. The cold eyes were looking over his shoulder, and Rez was pointing at him in a commanding way. Wheeling quickly he saw the guard leader just launching himself from the table top. Hearing the noise of the fight, he had evidently broken rules for once in his life and had come to the disk room unsummoned.

As he leaped and closed, Rez sprang from the other side. But, swinging the guard's body like a giant pendulum, Sanderson managed to check his attack. Then he loosed his hold of the flying body. The guard leader smashed against the wall, his helmet crushed down over his eyes, bleeding from nose and mouth.

With the momentum of the swing, Sanderson closed with Rez, now maddened instead of nauseated by the

feel of that dry, abhorrent skin. Disregarding a rain of blows on face and body, he clamped his hand over the airhole again—the vulnerable spot, this hole in the heavy throat. Incapable now of clear thinking, he yet remembered that. It was several seconds before he was thrown off by the convulsive ferocity of the evil monster.

He glanced toward the door, struck by a sudden apprehension that more guards might appear. But a moment later this fear was laid. The disk was broken now, and without its transmitting power Rez was unable to call help. The leaders, with their fragments of the diamond in their helmets, could receive no message through the great parent stone. They would probably be uninterrupted in their grim battle.

Bracing his shoulders, he met a fresh charge from Rez, and the struggle was recommenced. On and on they fought. Rez seemed as tireless and invincible as a thing of steel. Sanderson could not down him. And meanwhile he protected himself with increasing difficulty from the bull-like rushes, the tremendous clutching hands, and the battering fists.

All that kept him up now was the superlative training and physical treatments he had received from Eden and had kept up of his own volition after Eden's death. Almost too exhausted to think, his muscles carried him of themselves. He was nearly out, but his body continued to function, to stand the punishment it was receiving from the heavier muscles of his antagonist.

And always, whenever they closed, he felt blindly for the airhole.

Back and forth over the torn carpet they rocked, until they were near the wall where lay the curtain Rez had wrenched down in his effort to keep from falling. Here was the second javelin of the two that had fallen with the curtain. Rez stooped to pick it up. Sanderson sprang toward him to prevent it.

Raising his heavily sandaled foot, Rez kicked him backward with all his strength. Sanderson staggered a dozen feet and fell to the floor. Rez caught up the second javelin, poised it at arm's length, and threw it at the head of the fallen man.

Flashing in the light of the rinay plates, it sped toward the bearded face. It never reached its destination. In his fall Sanderson had grasped at one of the metal benches. Now he managed to swing it in front of him before the spear could reach him. It glanced from the smooth surface as though from a shield and ripped into the carpet a dozen paces beyond.

Rez reached up for another javelin, but before he could get it Sanderson whirled the heavy bench at him with all his remaining strength. Rez caught most of the force of the blow on his huge arms, but a corner of the bench went beyond his guard and smashed against the cylindrical hood.

The impact plainly jarred the brain beneath the metal. Rez was dazed for a moment, and showed it. He moved his grotesque skull slowly to right and left as though trying to shake loose from an enveloping fog, and behind the heavy lenses his eyes blinked uncertainly.

Leaping to follow up the advantage, Sanderson flung himself on his antagonist, his hand coming down over the vulnerable airhole as he closed. This time it looked as though he were to be successful in holding it there. Shaken like a stick in a whirlpool by the frenzied effort of Rez to loose himself, he clung to his grip. The great body under him grew markedly weaker. . . .

Then Rez drew away a few inches, bent his artificial head back, and brought it down on Sanderson's temple like a club with all the weight of his powerful neck behind the blow.

Sanderson's grip was relaxed, and Rez staggered free.

His feet touched something near the end curtain—the fragments of the broken disk. Instantly he picked one up and threw it at Sanderson. It caught him on the shoulder, and a jagged streak of red marked where its edge had struck.

Swaying unsteadily, seeing his nightmare opponent through the mists of exhaustion, Sanderson moved to attack him again. It was his last attempt and he knew it. There would be no more reserves of strength on which to call if he failed in this final effort to overcome the devil with the metal skull.

He lurched blindly toward the dimly seen figure and lashed out with his fist. Again he landed on the metal hood—with his broken hand. But the pain was welcome. It slashed across the veils of fading consciousness for an instant, and braced him like a plunge into cold water.

On his cheek he felt the gasping breaths from the airhole. There was blood around it now, where the metal rim had cut into the encircling flesh with the straining of the throat muscles. If he could cover that for a moment——

Circling the thick torso with his right arm, he caught the right wrist of Rez and forced it up and across in a wrestling hold. Then he twisted his legs around the legs of his opponent and threw him heavily to the floor. In the fall his left hand sought the airhole and clamped down over it with the firmness of despair.

Rez tore fiercely at the imprisoning hand, and pushed his fist into the sweaty, bearded face above him, but Sanderson kept his hold. He ignored the wrenching fingers that sought his own throat in a last attempt to clear the distressing hand away from the airhole. Ever more firmly he pressed down on the screened opening through which Rez breathed and therefore lived.

The great body under him moved more and more sluggishly. The hand that sought to throttle him, to push his face away, hurt him not at all—due to the deadened condition of his own nerves as much as to the failing force of his antagonist.

As before, Rez brought his head forward on Sanderson's temple like a club. But this time, stretched on the floor as he was with no room given him for a back swing, and with his neck held almost immovable by the professor's right hand, the blow did little harm.

Suddenly he was struggling no longer, writhing and twisting no more. Under the weight of the earthman he had mocked, he lay still, gone at last to the death to which he had condemned so many others in the thousands of years of his unnatural and monstrous life.

For moments Sanderson kept his hand pressed against the airhole in the now rigid throat. It did not occur to him that there was no longer need of the deadly grip. He did not notice that the heavy limbs of the devil beneath him had ceased to twitch and jerk. Indeed he was beyond conscious thought, holding himself from fainting by sheer force of will. All that he could recollect was that he must keep his hand pressed over the hole. He must not relax his grip. He must——

The overstrained body bore down the last barrier of blind will. He sighed deeply. His eyes closed, jerked feebly open, closed again. He sagged against the body of the evil genius he had conquered, rolled from it, and lay senseless by its side.

16. The Escape

A LITTLE later Sanderson opened his eyes and gazed bewilderedly around at the wrecked disk room. Then he saw the body of Rez lying huge and motionless beside him, and he got quickly to his feet as memory

caught up with the events that had taken place.

In one corner Neal lay unconscious. Sanderson went over to him and began to chafe his hands in an attempt to bring him to. There was a lump on his head above his right ear, but there seemed to be no other injury. He touched the spot tentatively, and Neal stirred and sat up.

"I bumped my head," he murmured, and Sanderson's heart sank at the blank look in his eyes. Rez was dead, but the injury done to Neal by his devilish drug still persisted.

Neal gazed at him with a pleased expression. "I broke the circle," he said proudly. "I did everything you told me, didn't I?"

"Yes," said the professor with a sigh. "You saved our lives and made it possible for me to accomplish my mission—but God knows if you'll ever be able to realize it!"

He stopped as Neal stared wonderingly over his shoulder.

"Look!" he said. "The pretty lady!"

Sanderson turned then to see what he was pointing at, and gasped with surprize at what he saw.

In the opening made by the fallen curtain near the broken disk stood a graceful, white-robed figure. A girl.

Her face was firmly molded and beautiful. Her hair was dark and lustrous in the light of the rinay plates. She swayed a little, and it was seen that she was hardly able to stand upright. Her cheeks were white as the garment that covered her; but even as Sanderson stared at her he saw a tinge of color touch them, saw her sway less uncertainly as she grew accustomed to standing again. Her eyes, brown with a tinge of gold in them, regarded the room confusedly, and finally looked questioningly at the bearded giant who was watching her.

Then she saw the great form on the stone floor, and she shrank back with a gasp of terror. She spoke, and it was the voice that had issued from the disk, but now it was a voice warm with life.

"What—what is this place? Why am I here?" Her eyes fell on the grotesque form of Rez again. "That head!" she whispered. "The nightmare dreams I've had! . . ."

Sanderson felt Neal stir restlessly, and as he turned to look at him he thought he saw a light of intelligence struggling to return to the blue of his eyes.

"The voice!" he murmured; "the voice——" But he could get no farther on his backward mental journeying.

He rose and walked toward the girl with a child-like smile on his face—an expression so at variance with the breadth of his shoulders and the stubble of beard on his face that she drew away from him and glanced appealingly at the professor.

"It's all right," said Sanderson. "He won't hurt you."

"But who is he? And why am I here?"

"Don't you remember how you got here?"

"I remember nothing," she said. "Nothing! I was walking along the road near the hotel at Hammam Meskoutine in the evening, and some men dressed as Arabs approached. I felt a cloth pressed against my mouth and nose—and after that I remember nothing until now. Only"—she shuddered and pointed—"only that awful head! It seemed as though I were sleeping and trying to wake up. And I would see that head——"

"You've been asleep," said Sanderson. "But very soundly! How long have you been here, Miss——"

"My name is Eileen Sanger. It was November tenth that the Arabs captured me——"

"They were no Arabs, Miss Sanger. They were of a far more exotic race! And it is now some time in March."

"But——" she began helplessly.

Sanderson interrupted her. "I'll explain something of this to you later.

Now we must leave at once before we're recaptured."

"You're hurt," she protested, catching sight of the red stain on his tunic and moving toward him.

"It's only a scratch. Come, we must go. At once!"

With the girl on one side of him and Neal moving mechanically on the other, he started down the broad steps that led from the disk room.

AT THE last turn of the stairs he motioned for them to wait while he went ahead to see if any of the lieutenants were in the guardroom. In a moment he came back up around the bend, his finger to his lips.

"There's one of the leaders in there now," he whispered. "But they're changing the guard, and he'll probably be leaving soon."

On tiptoe they filed after him, Neal grinning delightedly at the interesting game they were playing, and clinging to the girl's hand. They peered cautiously into the guardroom; the leader was no longer in sight.

As calmly as they might, the three walked among the motionless puppets of Rez's guard, out the door, and down the ramp to the floor of the tremendous cavern in the middle of which was the bizarre double palace of Rez—the palace that was now only a great tomb for the ruler it had housed so long.

Sanderson glanced hurriedly around the edge of the cave till he found the tunnel Rez had so mockingly shown them in the disk—the tunnel that led eventually to the normal world above them. Quickly they traversed the great floor and entered the passage mouth.

The professor sighed with relief, then, and slackened their pace as much as he dared in consideration of the girl. Eileen was very weak after her long spell of hypnotic inactivity. Sanderson marveled that she could walk at all, and he could only conclude that whatever food essence had been fed her during that long unconsciousness must be far more strength-sustaining than any he knew of.

"I think we're safe now," he said to her. "As we go I'll try to explain things to you briefly—give you some idea of the devil who kept you prisoner all this time, and how it is that my unfortunate young friend thinks he knows your voice. . . ."

IN THE room of the disk, the guard leader whom Sanderson had left for dead stirred and sat up with a moan. Stonily he gazed at the gigantic figure with the metal head. It told him nothing. Neither he nor any other man of Rez had ever seen that head—and lived to tell of it afterward. Because the fallen giant had pointed at the man with the black beard, he had attacked him. He did not know clearly why he had obeyed the gesture, save that there had been something commanding in it—something that inspired in him the same feeling of obedience he experienced when commanded by the disk.

Here he gazed at the place where the diamond used to be—and scrambled to his feet. This was something he could understand! The blue diamond, the mouthpiece of the god, Rez, was destroyed. It could only have been done by the man with the beard, or by the smaller man with him. They must be caught and brought back to the god for punishment!

He sprang down the stairs to the guardroom and shouted a command. With the precision of machinery the men formed into a double file and followed him at a run—down the ramp and out onto the floor of the central cavern. One of the guards there was questioned, and answered by raising his arm and pointing to the tunnel entrance over which was the symbolic mural monster.

Toward this the men sped, following the disheveled, bloody figure of

their leader, to capture the ones who had dared to break the blue diamond of Rez, and to bring them back for punishment.

As Sanderson finished his brief outline, the girl looked up at him with wonder in her eyes.

"So you destroyed this evil power just as you set out to do so many years ago!" she exclaimed. "Why, it's more wonderful than the winning of the greatest battle ever fought! If the world knew——"

"I'm afraid the world wouldn't believe it even if it were told," said the professor dryly. "But I didn't do it for medals or votes of thanks. And I'm not the only one to be praised, remember. I devoted my life to the cause—but Neal has given his mind!"

Eileen touched Neal's arm gently.

"Will he always be like this?"

"No, he'll probably learn all over again to be a man, just as any child grows to manhood in the course of time. . . ."

At that instant they rounded a bend in the tunnel and saw before them the blank wall that had been shown them in the disk.

"Here we are!" said Sanderson thankfully. "And there's the lever that swings the door. . . ."

He stopped abruptly to listen. Behind them came a noise of sandaled feet on the rock floor, and even as Eileen gazed fearfully at him, the pursuing Rezians rounded the turn and poured toward them.

With an exclamation Sanderson leaped for the lever and pulled it down. At the pressure the rock door trembled slightly, then began to slide up in its invisible grooves.

"Under it!" cried the professor. "Roll under it!"

They leaped to obey him. He jammed the lever to its closed position and, as the door began to slide downward, he threw all his weight sideways and snapped the heavy metal strip close to its slot in the stone. Then he rolled under the slab and joined them in safety on the other side.

But though the pursuers could not follow them, at the order of their leader they did something else almost as alarming. They bent down to the diminishing space under the descending door and shouted. Twice they yelled in chorus before the thick slab ground down and cut off the noise as a knife slashes a string. Ahead of the escaping prisoners the sound, through some trick of acoustics, echoed along the tunnel in a warning roar that did not die completely for several seconds.

Sanderson frowned anxiously as they hurried down the passage to the outer gate of the kingdom. Unless he was mistaken, that had been a signal of warning to the men in the outpost. And of these, as he remembered it, there were twelve!

Hastily he sketched the situation to Eileen.

"This is what we'll do," he said. "In this cave we're approaching there is another lever arrangement like the first. We'll charge the place and run for the lever. You will press it down while Neal and I hold the guards away from you. As soon as the door swings up you two roll under it. Then I'll start it down, break off the lever as I did before, and join you. You understand?"

"Yes."

"And you, Neal? You're to keep anyone from hurting Eileen. You don't want Eileen to be hurt, do you?"

Neal scowled. "No!" he said, shaking his head vigorously. "No! I wouldn't let anyone hurt her. Ever!"

Eileen pressed his arm, and smiled at Sanderson though her lips were pallid with alarm.

Soon they drew near to the outer cave—the last outpost of the leaderless kingdom of Rez. Could they win through that, they would be free. A narrow passage, a crevice of soft dirt

that could be easily widened to admit their passage, and they would stand in the direct light of sky again instead of in the reflected light of the metal plates.

At length Sanderson was able to look ahead and see the entrance of the outpost cave. Drawn up across it, stiffly forbidding, were the twelve guards. The entrance was wide, and, to reach across it, the little band had to stand in a single line; but they stood close together, and it looked impossible to break through even for a moment's work at the lever.

Sanderson stooped and picked up two large rock fragments, motioning Neal to do the same.

"Throw at the two men on the right side," he whispered. "That side, there. I'll take the two at the left."

Drawing back his arm for a throw, Sanderson suddenly sprang from behind the boulder that had concealed them momentarily, and ran forward with Neal and Eileen close behind.

Before the puppets could move, both on the professor's end had dropped under his throws, made from such short range that it was almost impossible to miss; and one on the right went down with a broken head under Neal's cast, while the man next to him doubled up under the force of a rock that caught him in the stomach.

Without an instant's pause they rushed forward. The two center men reached for Sanderson. There was a sickening sound as their heads were smashed together. Another was bowled out of the way—and the giant professor had cleared a path for the two behind him.

"To the lever!" he shouted; and Eileen ran across the cave. But there she paused uncertainly. There were two.

"Which lever?" she called to him. "The yellow one?"

"My God, no!" cried Sanderson, the words of Rez ringing in his ears: the one of yellow metal starts in motion the process of measured vibration that caused the rock slide. . . .

"Pull the gray lever!" he shouted. "The gray——".

He was surrounded by the men of Rez, the heart of a whirling group that now and then split apart to show him in its center, indomitably lashing out with his great arms.

Eileen pressed the lever indicated. Two of the guards jumped toward her. "Neal——" she implored.

A struggling mass of three fighting figures suddenly disentangled itself, and Neal leaped between the girl and the advancing pair. The glare of his eyes as he faced the two was appalling. He was like an animal gone mad. They hesitated an instant before continuing their rush, and as they wavered he took the initiative himself. One crumpled backward as a fist crashed against his unprotected body just above the heart. The other went down with Neal on top and feeling for his throat.

On the opposite side the professor was more than holding his own. His great fists were performing deadly work among the men of Rez who had never before seen a man hit with his bare fists and who had no notion of how to guard themselves. One he caught fairly in the chest with his swollen right hand. It was excruciatingly painful to hit with that hand, but he had no chance to spare it. With this blow he felt the flesh give under his knuckles, felt rather than heard a dull snap—and the guard went down with a broken collarbone.

Meanwhile the door was responding to the touch of the lever. Up it slid, revealing a narrow dark passage with a crack of light in the far distance that was unlike the eternal sun-yellow of the rinay plates—for this was the gray light of a clouded sky. Now there was room to roll under the door. . . .

The guards charged with new fury at the escaping prisoners. For a moment Neal was down and helpless, but

Sanderson managed to win clear of his own assailants and help him up again.

Behind him the guard with the broken collarbone was creeping painfully toward the two levers.

"Run!" the professor commanded. "I can hold them a little longer."

But Neal was deaf to his order. One of the guards had caught Eileen by the arm in an attempt to drag her away from the door, and Neal had gone more berserk than ever.

"Run, I say!" gasped Sanderson. "Eileen—make him go with you!"

At the touch of her hand, Neal quieted a little and allowed himself to be urged out of the fight. Reluctantly he followed her under the door, which was almost at the top of its swing.

Sanderson redoubled his efforts to throw off the figures that leaped and clung to him. He must somehow win enough time to reach the lever and start the door down again.

Unseen behind him, crawling slowly along the rock wall, the guard with the broken collarbone edged his way toward the door. His eyes were fixed unblinkingly on the lever block, as though, that being his goal, he would draw strength enough from its sight to allow him to reach it.

The professor stumbled and nearly fell over a motionless body at his feet. Quickly he stooped and picked it up. As the others charged he threw it at them with all the power left him, and won a second's breathing space.

Neal and Eileen were through in safety. All that remained was to start the door on its descent, beat off the guard for just a moment or two longer, and then join them.

He jammed the lever up and threw his weight against it to break it off as he had the other one. . . .

The lever did not break. It bent in his hands till it lay at right angles along the slotted block of stone in which it moved. But break it would not!

And now his short interval of freedom was over. Back came the remnant of the guard, their number swelled by the one whom Neal had hit in the stomach with his rock. They seemed not to know pain, these puppets of the black kingdom. Man by man Sanderson hurled them to the floor, flung them aside, knocked them over; but man by man they came on. Never for an instant did he have an opportunity of tearing entirely free from their clutching hands.

He was drugged with exhaustion, and his right hand was swollen into a small pillow that hurt no one but himself when he struck with it. His blows were not crippling any longer. Under their impact the automatons found it easier and easier to rise and renew their charges.

The door had reached a fatally low level in its slow, even descent. In a few more seconds it would have swung too low for him to pass under it. . . .

Beside it the guard with the broken collarbone stopped in his painful crawling, his goal reached at last.

Laboriously he reached for one of the levers—the yellow one. He couldn't quite grasp it—groped up again. The effort was too much for him. As he made a last attempt his eyes closed and he fell back to the floor.

But, clenched in his unconscious hand, moving down as he moved, was the yellow lever!

"Coming?" As though from a great distance, Eileen's cry reached Sanderson's dulled hearing. "Oh, Neal!" he heard an instant later. "They must have got him! The door's almost closed and he's still in——"

The enormous slab of rock thudded into place and Sanderson could hear no more.

He was terribly weak. The superhuman exertions of his fight with Rez, the killing pain of his broken hand, the impossible odds in the outer cave, had entirely worn him out.

Working his way back toward the levers, he fumbled behind him with his puffed right hand while pounding away with his left. The bent lever could not be moved. Unless there were some auxiliary mechanism of control the door would never be opened to let him out.

The still figure of the guard by the block at his feet, he was unable to see. Nor did he see the ominous yellow lever pulled down to its last notch by the rigid hand.

And now the solid rock of the floor beneath him seemed to sway and tremble. He brushed his hand wearily across his eyes. Under the rush of two of the guards he staggered for a moment, then recovered his balance. His recovery was only momentary.

Three more charged him. Hitting out at them feebly, he fell. . . .

IN THE narrow dirt passage outside, Eileen stared, horrified, at the closed door. Through it no slightest sound issued, and the silence, after the noise of fighting, was as oppressive as the silence of a crypt. Behind the thick barrier, hopelessly walled in, was Sanderson—gigantic, heroic Sanderson. Could nothing be done to help him?

At her impulsive direction, Neal put his fingers under the great slab and tried to raise it. The effort was useless, of course; a crane could hardly have lifted it. The block was as immovable as the solid wall in which it was set.

For a few moments she waited there, hoping to the last that the door would swing up again and the professor would come to meet them. Then she turned to Neal.

"We won't help him any by just standing here," she said with a broken sigh that showed how near she was to utter collapse. "Let's enlarge the passage so it will be big enough to get out of when—if—he does win through."

"All right," Neal agreed; "what shall I do now?"

"Dig," said Eileen, setting him an example with her own slim hands.

There was only a yard or so of the too narrow crevice that needed to be widened. The walls were of soft, crumbling mold, easy to tear loose even with unaided fingers. In a few minutes they should be through with their task. But as they worked something occurred that spurred them on to frantic haste.

The earth around them began to tremble. It swayed rhythmically back and forth, its motion gradually increasing in violence till it was like the rocking of a tall building in a gale of wind. There was something measured and deliberate about the movement. It was like the swinging of a long suspension bridge under regularly marching feet—oscillating more and more in response to the measured footfalls until the whole structure is set in dangerous motion by a few pounds weight.

"Hurry!" cried Eileen. "It's an earthquake!"

Behind them a large section of earth loosened and fell from the roof of the passage. Dirt began to pour down on them in ever growing clumps. But now Neal was so nearly through that he could reach his head and arm out the opening. With a heave of his back, he broke the ground clear and crawled free.

Eileen reached her hand toward him and he caught it quickly, pulling her toward him into the clear air. Just as she was half through the entrance, however, she exclaimed and bit her lip with sudden pain as a large piece of dirt fell on her ankle. And hardly had she left the tunnel mouth than the whole passage caved.

Confusedly they looked around them.

THEY had emerged at the base of a small mound of earth completely covered with bushes and thorn-trees.

No one would have dreamed that in the midst of the harmless-looking bank of vegetation there was an entrance leading down to a vast subterranean city.

The mound was at the foot of Block Mountain, hardly four hundred yards away from it. As they lay there, clinging dazedly to the rocking earth, Neal raised his hand and pointed to the great, square hill of gray rock.

"Look!" he cried. "It is moving!"

It was. Huge pieces were being chipped from its swaying sides, some of them rolling down the slope of the hill and coming dangerously near to their place of refuge. Cracks appeared in its cliffs, which widened even as they gazed at them. The mountain seemed to be dancing, to be capering monstrously in time to some measured drum-beat.

The spectacle could not endure much longer—it was impossible for rock to stand that shaking without flying to pieces.

With a last increase in violence the earth about them quaked and tilted. Olive- and palm-trees for hundreds of yards around were uprooted and flung down. Huge gaps appeared in the earth, and closed and opened like dry wounds in the heaving breast of a giant. A fountain of water shot up to incredible heights as the underground lake was compressed to rebellion by the collapse of a great section of its rock covering.

And then with a roar that left them stunned and deafened for hours afterward, Block Mountain, in a boiling cloud of rock dust, sank in upon itself as though the foundation had been jerked from under it. For an average of a hundred feet, it dropped, thousand-ton fragments of stone piling up on one another like beach pebbles tossed in the waves of the sea.

Beneath it, with a mountain for a tombstone, was the annihilated kingdom of Rez—and Professor Eden Sanderson, its destroyer.

17. The New Era

IN ALL the newspapers of the world there was announcement of a new peace pact signed by the powers of Europe, Asia and America. True, this announcement was located generally on the inside pages. As usual the man in the street had been unaware that war threatened. But many a gray-bearded statesman sighed with relief at the news. What had caused the last moment aversion to war they did not know—nor care. Peace was the important fact. Peace—when all the signs had pointed to red struggle!

In the same papers began to be printed ever-growing lists of endowments by wealthy men of all nations. A wave of philanthropy swept the earth, as inexplicable as it was beneficial. Philosophers of every race observed the wholesale, kindly changes and wondered at their cause. Some astrologers spoke of heavenly disturbances, claiming that the puzzling red spot on Jupiter was the reason for the unbelievably prosperous and peaceful era.

All knew that an enormous change for the better had taken place on earth. All wondered vaguely what had brought it about. But in all the world only one person knew the answer to the benevolent riddle.

At the moment when China and America were celebrating the second anniversary of their initial peace pact, this knowledgeable person, a girl with lustrous dark hair who wore a curious blue diamond ring on her finger, sat in the office of a famous brain specialist and watched him apply various mental tests to an unremarkable-looking young man with wide blue eyes and the perplexed, searching appearance of one who tries to remember some half-forgotten thing.

The specialist rose, on terminating the examination, and motioned for her to go with him to another room.

"He's coming along splendidly,"

he said when they were out of the patient's hearing. "You say he remembers his life up until the time he went abroad after his father's death?"

"Most of it," the girl replied. "There are still occasional blind spots. Now and then he'll meet some old acquaintance without recognizing him, and a few incidents of his later years with his father are gone. But the only section of his life that remains completely blank is what happened after he sailed on the cruise boat."

"Hmm. That was about the time he took the drug, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was shortly afterward."

"I wish you could tell me the name of the drug. I've never heard of any with so lasting an effect on the mind."

"I don't know what it was myself," murmured the girl.

"And how did you say he came to take it?" probed the specialist.

Eileen smiled to herself as she imagined how the doctor would receive a detailed account of the circumstances in which Neal had lost his memory. Professor Sanderson—Rez—the metal skull—the crusade. He would probably insist on treating her as a patient, too, if she told him of the heroic quest of the big, black-bearded scientist.

"I didn't say," she evaded his interrogation. Then she changed the subject. "In your opinion he is entirely normal again?"

"Save for that one blank spot in his memory—yes. And I suppose you can inform him on that if you choose?"

"I know most of his story," she admitted. "And some day soon I'll tell him about it." She rose and drew on her gloves. "Thank you a thousand times for your help and kindness."

"There's nothing to thank me for, Mrs. Emory," answered the doctor. "Though it might have taken a little longer, eventually your husband would have recovered just as well without my services. After all, the only thing a specialist is able to do is aid nature on her course. . . ."

The new era was complete.

[THE END]

A Bizarre Weird-Scientific Story

The Frog

By GRANVILLE S. HOSS

NOVEMBER 4th.—It has long been my contention that the great difference in the intelligence and advancement of man, in comparison with the lower animals, has not been due to any innate superiority or peculiar advantage arbitrarily bestowed by the creator. I have held the theory that man's leadership of all created life has been due to the more rapid absorption by his brain of certain chemical properties which have tended to promote growth of the brain cells with corresponding expansion of his intellect.

I have believed that if it were possible to reduce to concrete form the chemical elements which have given

growth and development to the mind of man, it would be possible to inject the resulting substance into the brain of one of the lower forms of life and raise the subject of the experiment to the intellectual level of man.

This thought first came to me in my college days. It has been with me throughout all the years since that time. Never but once have I shared these views with another. Fifteen years ago I admitted my closest friend, Dr. Mark Potter, to my thoughts. I talked enthusiastically and at length, giving in detail what I considered substantial reasons for my conclusions, ending by suggesting that he join me in the effort to verify the deductions at which I had arrived.

His laughter was like a basin of ice water dashed in my face. "Illingham," he cried, "you are crazy, or soon will be if you continue to dwell on such thoughts. Forget that idle twaddle and give your time to advancing in your profession. One way leads to fortune and renown; the other, to the madhouse."

I made no reply to this tirade, but changed the conversation and for the remainder of the time we were together discussed the latest issue of the *Medical and Surgical Review*.

But my efforts were continued. My leisure hours and for the past ten years my whole time has been given to what has become the one absorbing interest of my life, and now I am ready for the final grand test. I shall soon know if the years have been wasted or if I have found one of the great secrets of life.

I am too nervous to write any more tonight. I must go out for a walk.

November 5th.—While this diary is not meant to be seen by other eyes than my own, I shall nevertheless not go into details of the composition of my brain serum, as life is uncertain and the record might fall into the hands of others. It has been a weary task to gain the small phial of the precious substance now reposing in my safe. In order to get it, I have been many times guilty of what the law pronounces to be serious crimes. I have not hesitated to violate the grave and betray the most sacred trusts. If failure is my portion, then my life will have been worse than wasted. In that event I shall not face the light of another day, but seek rest in Nirvana. On the other hand, success will wipe clean the slate and I will have added inestimably to the world's knowledge. The veil which hides many of the phenomena of earthly life will have been pierced.

November 8th.—For three days I have been attempting to decide on a subject for the final great test. Shall it be bird, beast or reptile? In my opinion, any specimen will answer. As my supply of brain serum is very limited, I think I shall select a small creature; so if the results are not immediately what I expect, I can discontinue the injections and select some other species. I must give this matter the thought it deserves.

November 11th.—My decision is made. I have chosen a bullfrog, a fine, healthy fellow which I obtained from the lake adjacent to the city. I have constructed him a home in my laboratory, a small pool of cement with a bottom of mud and water plants. My greatest difficulty will be suitable food, but I think it can be managed. Tonight I shall administer the first injection of brain serum. I am nervous and laboring under great excitement. This will not do. I must be calm.

November 12th.—Mr. Frog withstood the operation beautifully. I was quite alarmed at first, as he lay in a comatose state for an hour and was quite dazed for a much longer period. He is active now. I am unable to observe any change in him, unless it is that he moves about more than formerly. I feel much encouraged. The results are all I have hoped for from the first tiny injection of serum.

November 17th.—Eureka! Success has attended me. After three more injections of serum, my frog shows unmistakable signs of an awakening intelligence. He starts at sudden noises, and, instead of at once plunging into the basin, he immediately faces in the direction from whence they come, seeming to ponder the cause. He apparently watches me as I move about the room and seems to have no fear. He spends less time in the water and moves about the room in a restless manner. I wish now my selection had been different. A creature higher in the scale of life—a monkey, for instance—might in time have been taught to communicate with me. However, it is too late now for regrets and I shall keep on with the frog.

November 25th.—Undoubtedly, my theory has been proven correct. Each day my frog grows in intelligence. He watches my every movement and observes me at my meals, which I have formed the habit of preparing in my laboratory, where I also sleep. At first he would eat nothing but insects, but the other day I tried him with a small piece of vegetable on the end of my knife. His tongue at once seized the morsel, which he promptly swallowed. Since then, he always partakes with me when I eat. He seems to be losing his appetite for insects, for when offered a fly alongside a tiny bit from my plate, he rejected the fly for the other. He spends less and less time in the water.

I have been under a nervous strain since commencing the experiment and seem unable to throw it off. This positively will not do. I must relax.

November 30th.—My frog has developed a memory. He has seemed to recognize me for several days, and when I enter the room from an excursion to the outside he hops toward me with every appearance of delight, uttering queer little croaking noises. Last night I offered him a small portion of food sprinkled with quinine powder; he accepted it, but immediately emitted a raucous cry and attempted to eject the bitter dose. He acted completely disgusted, moved from my vicinity and would have nothing more to do with me the whole evening. This episode is full of interest.

December 4th.—Mr. Bullfrog has become quite an imitator. He not only follows me about, seemingly interested in my every movement, but tonight attempted to stand upright. He was only partly successful, maintaining his balance for but a few seconds, then falling to the floor. He also tries to use his hands, keeping one continually moving, while resting on the other. He picks up small articles, such as match sticks and any other tiny objects he finds in his way. I now call him and he responds. He quails at a note of anger in my voice, much in the manner of a puppy. In the light of my present success, I now wish more than ever I had selected some creature higher in the scale of life for the experiment. However, it is too late. My malady increases. My nights are broken.

December 10th.—I am disappointed. While my frog develops in mind each day, I can now see that he has not a human mind and never will have. His brain might expand to the utmost in cunning, but it would still be reptilian. I experienced an example of this a few nights ago. I crossed the room hurriedly in answer to the ringing of the telephone and stepped on one of the frog's feet, with the result that he is now a cripple. He uttered a loud cry, sprang upon my foot and attempted to bite me. Of course this was impossible, considering that he has no teeth, but his actions quite shocked me. He now will have nothing to do with me, backing away at my approach and uttering ribald raucous cries. I know of no other words to describe his noise. He has formed a bitter hatred for me, watching me unceasingly with what

appears to be a baleful glare in his eyes, ready at my first movement in his direction to back away with his awful cries.

December 15th.—My old nervous disorder has returned upon me with full vigor. I have been unable to sleep for three nights and suppose I shall have to go back to drugs in order to get necessary sleep. The frog still refuses all my friendly advances and exhibits an unholy cunning.

December 20th.—Last night I enjoyed the first sound sleep I have had for a week, but was awakened in the most extraordinary manner, which would be ridiculous were it not for the shattered condition of my nerves. I was aroused by a cold sensation on my chest, to find the frog seated there, his little hands gripping my throat and apparently attempting to the utmost of his puny strength to strangle me. At my first awakening, he leaped to the floor and retreated to his pool, uttering his unearthly cries, which to my half-aroused senses seemed to be charged with threats. I wish I could kill the monster, but can not. He seems like a creature of my own creation, being, as he is, the culminating result of years of preparation.

December 22nd.—I was reawakened last night in the same ghoulish manner, with the addition that this time he was attempting to bite. Had he been gifted with fangs, they would certainly have been buried in my throat. I shall be compelled to confine the beast if this continues. I wonder if my snores annoy him. I am aware that I snore dreadfully and know it must be worse than ever when sleep is induced by artificial means, as is now necessary with me. Anyway, the hatred of the frog is mounting, as shown by attacks on two successive nights.

December 23rd.—Again! This time the rascal was clawing and tearing at my mouth. As I sat up, he leaped to the floor and hurried to his pool, where I heard him plunge in. His cries were fearful, baleful, and to my drug-clouded senses, laden with warning. This positively will not do. Today I shall build a fine wire fence about his pool. Let him use the brain I have given him and climb out if he can.

Extract from the Evening Star, December 24th

Dr. John Illingham, a well known retired physician of this city, was discovered dead in his bed today. Death was due to strangulation. Lodged firmly in his throat, as though he had made an effort to swallow it, was a full grown bullfrog.

Medical examination disclosed the fact that Dr. Illingham had been in the habit of using large quantities of drugs, and it has been suggested that he had become temporarily insane and attempted to swallow the frog. Only a crazed man would attempt such a feat. The frog was quite dead when removed from the throat of the deceased.

In the combined laboratory and bedroom, where the body was discovered, a small concrete pool had been built and around it erected a fine wire fence about five feet in height.

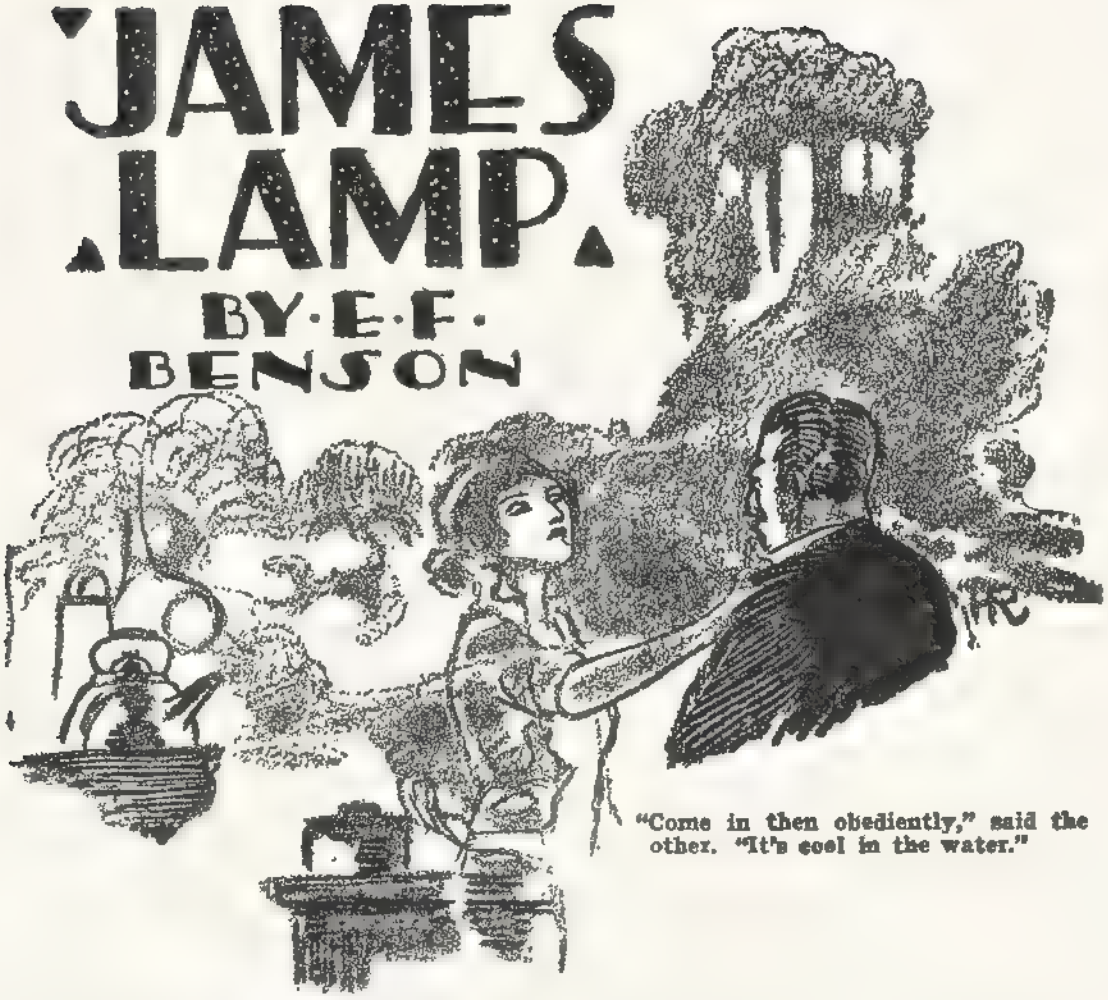
A strange diary was found among Dr. Illingham's effects, which seems to bear out the insanity theory. In this diary is mentioned the name of Dr. Mark Potter, a well known physician of this city. In the absence of any known relatives of Dr. Illingham, the diary has been turned over to Dr. Potter.

Statement by Dr. Mark Potter

I HAVE read the diary of my old friend Dr. Illingham and have been asked to make a statement thereon. There is little I can say. It is true that years ago he mentioned some such theory as that described in the diary. Whether it contained any truth or not, who can now say? If the diary is a strict record of fact, then it is apparent that the frog took the only method at his command to make an end of one whom he had come to hate and fear. If the coroner's theory is correct and the diary contains the ravings of a madman, then the conclusion arrived at by that official is probably true.

JAMES LAMP.

BY E. F. BENSON



"Come in then obediently," said the other. "It's cool in the water."

DR. JOHN STORELY, bachelor, of middle age and very comfortable circumstances, had lately retired from his extensive practise in London, while still in sound health and activity; for, as he justly remarked, what was the good of keeping in harness till you were too old and infirm to enjoy a well-earned leisure? He still spent most of the year in town, for he was of sociable habits, and the country, so he thought, was a very dreary place for a single man, who neither hunted nor shot, from the time when the autumn leaves begin to fall until spring had definitely established itself again. There were fogs and darkness, it was true, in London, but there were also gas-lamps and pavements, and a brisk walk along lighted streets to his club, where he would find a rubber of bridge before dinner was infinitely preferable to a tramp in dim and dripping country lanes, and the return again to his house at Trench, a small country town at the edge of the Romney Marsh, where he would spend a solitary evening. Winter days in the country closed in early, a servant came round and drew the curtains, and there you were shut up in your box till morning, whereas in London there were many friends about, and pleasant dinners at home or abroad, and amusements of all sorts ready to hand. As to going to some winter resort like the Riviera, the thought was anathema to him.

People went to the Riviera to get sunshine and all they got was blizzards and possibly pneumonia. London, to his mind, was the ideal place in which to spend the winter.

He had therefore arranged his life on these lines. His delightful little house down at Trench was in the hands of a caretaker and his wife from November till April; during the late spring and early autumn Storely was often down there for a week or a week-end, and then Mr. and Mrs. Lamp looked after him, she as cook with housemaid's help got in from the town, and her husband as general man servant. When summer arrived he moved his London household down there for two or three solid months, while the caretakers took charge of his house in London. Like a sensible man, he knew that a motor, now that he had no rounds of professional visits to pay, was a mere encumbrance in town, and accordingly he left his car at Trench throughout the winter.

He had bought this house some three years ago, just before he retired, and I had often been down to stay with him for those week-ends of spring and autumn, and for longer periods during the summer. It stood half-way down one of those steep, cobbled streets for which Trench is famous, and was the most adorable little abode. Three small gables of timber and rough-cast faced the road, and from the front it seemed rather shut in, but once inside, it opened out into a dignified and spacious privacy. There was a little paneled hall, with an oak staircase leading up to the first floor, and on each side of it a big ceiling-beamed room with wide open fireplace, and all these rooms looked out at the back on to a full acre of unexpected lawn and garden screened by high red brick walls from the intrusion of neighboring eyes. He had done the house up with due regard for its picturesque antiquity but with an equal regard for all possible demands of modern comfort: electric light was most conveniently installed, central heating supplemented the log-burning open hearths, and the three big bedrooms on the first floor had each its own bathroom. Just as perfect were the ministrations of the caretaking couple when Storely went down for the shorter periods of his sojourn, Lamp deft and silent-footed, and his wife, mostly invisible in her kitchen, manifesting her presence there by the most admirable meals. One saw her occasionally when she came up after breakfast to submit to Storely her proposed caterings for the day, a handsome, high-colored woman, with a hard smart air about her, and considerably younger than her husband; sometimes one met her in the town with her marketing-basket, and many smiles and ribands.

I WAS engaged in the spring of this year to spend a week at Easter with my friend. A few days before, I met him in the cardroom at the club, and we cut into a table of bridge together. After a couple of rubbers we cut out again, and he beckoned me aside to a remote corner, where we could talk privately.

"Upsetting news from Trench yesterday morning," he said. "A couple of days ago Mrs. Lamp, my caretaker's wife—do you remember her?"

"Indeed I do," said I.

"Well, she disappeared and has not been seen since. She used often to take long walks in the country by herself, when the two were alone there in the winter, and a couple of days ago she appears to have started for one, as was quite usual with her, but when the evening closed in, and it had got dark, she had not returned. Lamp behaved very sensibly and properly: he went to a house or two in the town where his wife sometimes visited, but no one had seen her, and about eleven o'clock that night, now feeling very uneasy, he went round to the police station, and told the inspector that she was still missing. They telephoned to

various villages in the neighborhood, and to wayside stations on the line, but got no news of her. But beyond that there was nothing more that could be done that night. Morning came, but there was still no sign of her, and Lamp telephoned to me to say what had happened. I went down there after breakfast this morning, and he disclosed to me a state of things of which I had no suspicion at all."

"A man?" I asked.

"Yes: the foreman in some builder's establishment in Hastings. Lamp and his wife had had words about him before, and a fortnight ago in consequence of what he had seen, he told the man he mustn't set foot in the house again, but he had been seen in Trench on the day that his wife disappeared. All this Lamp told me, but he had not mentioned it to the police, since naturally he did not want scandal to get about. But now, when his wife disappeared, it seemed to me that it was necessary to let the police know, in case she had gone to him, and I sent for the inspector and told him about it. He made enquiries in Hastings, but nothing could be heard about her. The foreman admitted that he had been in Trench that day, but said he had not seen her. He admitted also, when more closely questioned, that he and Mrs. Lamp had agreed that she should leave her husband and come to live with him. They intended to marry if Lamp would divorce her."

"And how is Lamp taking it?" I asked.

"My own opinion is that he will be much happier without her. He believes that she has gone to the foreman, though why, if she has, they should try to make a secret about it, it is impossible to say. But that is his firm conviction. The two, so Lamp told me, have had a horrible time of it this winter and if she was never heard of again, I don't think that he would be sorry. She certainly has made their life together a wretched business."

"But at present there's no clue as to what has happened to her?" I asked.

"Absolutely none. The police suggest loss of memory and sense of identity, as they always do when anyone disappears, and they're keeping an eye on the man at Hastings. It was painful to hear Lamp tell the story of all this, but he did it very frankly; they're convinced that he has told all he knows. Apparently there is quite sufficient evidence for him to get his divorce, and if she tries to come back to him again, he means to do it."

Storely got up.

"I thought I would just tell you," he said, "for we'll go down there as arranged the day after tomorrow. Lamp says he can get a woman from Trench to come in and cook, and like a sensible fellow he wants to get back to work again. Far the best thing for him to do."

So we went down together as had been settled: Trench looked more attractive and idyllic than ever in this sudden burst of spring and warm April weather. The red-brick houses climbing up the hill glowed in the mellow sunshine, its gardens were gay with fresh leaf and blossom. In the reclaimed marshland outside, the hawthorn hedges were in bud, innumerable lambs bleated and gambolled over the meadows, and the woods in the country round about were tapestried with primrose and anemone, and curled bracken-shoots. It is a land of greenness and streams and slow rivers winding over the levels to the sea; on the east side of the small town the Roop wanders along under the steep hill, on the west side the bigger Inglis sweeps widely past the south of the town and joins the other. Halfway down this western slope of the hill was Storely's house looking out on to the narrow cobbled street lined

with gabled cottages. At the bottom of it, not fifty yards from his door stood granaries and warehouses on the banks of the river Inglis, up which at high tide vessels of considerable tonnage can come to anchor and discharge their freights. The road to Hastings passes along this bank, then crosses the river by a bridge at the side of which are sluice-gates to be opened or shut to let through or limit the tide.

We strolled out, across the bridge, Storely and I, after tea on the day of our arrival. The tide was low, and one could see how deeply the flows and ebbs of the water had scooped out below the sluice great holes lined with soft shining mud, while others deeper yet were still undiscovered. From there we struck into a path leading across the daisied meadows of the marsh and bordered by dikes still brimming with the winter rains and fringed with the new growth of the reeds that pricked up through the dead raffle of last year. The sun was low to its setting, and now after this hot day skeins of mist were beginning to form over the level in the chill of the evening, shallow at present, but so opaque that at a little distance they appeared like sheets of gray flood-water through which stood up the trunks of the scattered thorn trees. Then, turning, we set our faces toward Trench, the topmost houses of which perched on the hill still glowed in the sunlight, though now on this lower land we walked in shadow. As we crossed again the bridge over the Inglis the mist had formed very thick upon the river and like a tide had crept across the quay-side. The air was chilly now and we walked more briskly to the foot of the steep cobbled street half-way up which stood Storely's house.

The pavement was narrow, not giving room for two to walk abreast, and I fell behind him.

Just here there joined this street on our right, a narrow footway faced with houses leading round to the south face of the hill, and as we passed this I saw there was a woman standing there. Her back was toward me, and she was looking up the street in the direction of Storely's house. He was a few paces ahead of me, and as I came directly opposite her, she turned, and I felt sure that her face was familiar to me, though for the moment I could not recollect who she was. Then close on the heels of that came recognition, and I knew that she was Mrs. Lamp. It was dusk, it was misty, and I could not see her face very precisely but I had no doubt of her identity.

I took a few quick steps forward and touched Storely on the shoulder.

"Turn round," I said quietly, "and have a look at that woman standing at the corner just below. See if you recognize her."

He turned, peering into the dusk.

"But I don't see any woman at all," he said. "There's no one there."

I turned also, and even as Storely had said, she was no longer there. I ran back to the corner where the footpath joined the street, and there she was moving quickly up it away from us. I beckoned to him, pointing up the footway.

"But what's all this about?" he asked.

"I want you to see her," said I. "She's walking up that path. Be quick, or she'll have gone."

He laughed.

"But I really can't go in pursuit of women in the dusk about the streets of Trench," he said. "Who is it that you want me to identify?"

"I feel sure it's Mrs. Lamp," I answered.

Instantly he joined me.

"What? Mrs. Lamp?" he said in a changed voice. "Where? that woman ahead there? I'll soon see."

I waited at the corner while he went quickly after her. They both passed out of sight round a bend in the foot-

path. In a couple of minutes he returned.

"I lost sight of her somehow," he said. "She must have turned into one of those houses there, though I didn't see her do so. Are you sure it was she?"

"No: that's why I wanted you to see her. But if it wasn't she, it was somebody most extraordinarily like her."

He thought a moment.

"I think we had better not say anything either to Lamp or the police at present," he said. "We're not certain enough, for it's dusk and after all you've only seen her a few times before. But if it is she, you may depend upon it that someone else will see her. We shall soon know."

LAMP was in the sitting-room when we got to the house. It was already chilly and he had just put a match to the fire of logs and brushwood in the hearth, had turned the lights on, and was now drawing the curtains. I thought he peered oddly and intently up and down the street before he pulled the heavy folds across the window. Somehow the sight (or so I believed) of the missing woman had roused an uneasy feeling in my mind, but how utterly illogical and senseless that was! For if it was she, all fear of her having come to some ill end was over, while if it was not she, there could be nothing unsettling in having seen some other woman who strongly reminded me of her. But it was odd, it was also regrettable that Storely had lost sight of her like that. If he had only had one decent look at her, the question would have been settled.

We spent a quiet evening, playing a rather serious game of chess after dinner. About ten o'clock while the game was still in progress, Lamp brought in a tray of water and spirits, and while he was in the room there came a soft tapping, very light, against the low diamond-paned window behind the curtains looking out on to the street. At the moment he was pouring some whisky into a glass, and looking up I saw he had paused as if listening.

"What was that tapping?" asked Storely absently as he considered his move.

"A butterfly, sir," said Lamp. "I saw one fluttering about on the window when I drew the curtains this evening."

"Must have been encouraged to come out after the winter by this hot sun," said Storely. "That's all we shall want, Lamp. You can go to bed: I'll put out the lights."

Lamp left us. Storely made his move, and as I was considering mine the soft tapping came again. He rose and went to the window.

"It sounded just as if someone was tapping at the pane from outside," he said.

He parted the curtains and looked out. There was silence for a moment.

"Just come here," he said to me.

The light from inside the room as he drew the curtain had cast a field of illumination into the street, and outside looking into the window was the figure of a woman. I could see her face clearly, and it was certainly that of her whom I had seen that evening in the dusk as we returned from our walk. She looked at Storely, then at me, and then between us into the room behind as if she was wanting somebody but not one of us.

"Stop there and watch her," said Storely to me, and he went out into the hall, and I heard him unlock the front door. The woman turned at the sound, and moved away from the window into the darkness. I heard Storely's step on the pavement outside, and he beckoned and called to me through the window.

"She's gone," he said. "Did you see which way she went?"

"I think down the hill," I said, and I heard his steps following her.

I went out after him into the street. It was an exceedingly dark night, and misty. I could not see more than a few yards in any direction. The light in the hall shone out of the open door, and I saw also that at the top of the house was a lit window against which was framed a man's head. Lamp had evidently gone up to bed, and hearing the sound of Storely's voice in the street was looking out. In a few minutes I heard Storely's returning steps.

"Come in," he said. "I lost her at once, for the fog is fearfully thick at the bottom of the hill."

He closed the door, and we sat down again on either side of our chess-board. Though the game was only half over he began putting the pieces back in the box.

"What are we to do?" he said. "There's no doubt who it was. But why is she here, and why does she come at night and tap at the window and then make off again? Did you see her looking between us as if she wanted somebody else? And if it's Lamp she wants, why doesn't she come and ask for him? Anyhow I must go round to the police station in the morning to tell them they needn't make any further enquiries about her, as she has certainly been seen. They aren't concerned about her connubial affairs, but only about her disappearance, and now that we've seen she's alive, there's nothing more for them to investigate. Hullo, I've scrapped our game. I'll play you another if you like, but it's late, and I know I shan't be able to concentrate."

He stared into the smoldering embers of the fire for a moment in silence, then wheeled round to me.

"It's all rather odd," he said. "I've no doubt it is she, absolutely none. But why did she come here at all, if it was only to sheer off again in that mysterious way? I wonder if by any chance Lamp has seen her? Surely he would have told me if he had."

Even as he spoke the door opened and Lamp came in.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "but I had just gone up to bed when I heard you go out and call from the street. I came down to see if you were wanting anything."

Storely pointed to the window.

"Your wife was standing about there a few minutes ago," he said. "I went out to see what she was doing here."

I was watching Lamp closely now, for an idea, wild and fantastic no doubt, had entered my head. He was standing by the electric light and I saw sudden beads of perspiration break out on his forehead, and his lips moved as if for speech, but no words came. But he quickly recovered himself.

"Indeed, sir?" he said. "And may I ask if you got speech with her?"

"No, she disappeared in the fog before I could come up with her. But you can dismiss from your mind now any fear that some accident has happened to her. I shall go round to the police station in the morning, and tell them they need not continue their search for her."

"Thank you very much, sir," said Lamp. "But I was never really afraid of that. I always thought that she had gone off with that man of hers. . . . And there's another thing, sir, if you wouldn't mind my mentioning it. I'll get all her clothes and bits of things ready packed for her, if it's that she's hanging about for, but I hope you won't allow her into the house again after what she's done."

"No, that's reasonable," said Storely. "I won't let her bother you if I can help it. You haven't seen her, I suppose?"

Again I watched Lamp. I saw him gulp in his throat before he spoke, and moisten his lips.

"No sir, and I don't want to," he said.

Storely nodded.

"That's all then, Lamp," he said. "I'll go to the police tomorrow."

"Thank you, sir," said Lamp again. "Of course it's a great relief to me to know that she's come to no bodily harm."

"But you said you weren't afraid of that," said Storely.

"I wasn't, sir," he said. "But it's another thing to be certain of it."

Now, Storely, like most people accounted sensible, both distrusts and despises all theories that admit the existence of occult and unexplained phenomena: the material world is sufficient for him, and the supernatural is a subject which he and I, though our topics are of decently wide range, always avoid. So I did not say anything to him about the notion which had entered my head, and which proved, when I had got to bed, to be very firmly and uncomfortably established there. In a word, I did not believe that the woman we had both seen was the living and material presentment of Lamp's wife. I believed that it was some bodiless phantom of her, and that Lamp also had seen her, and that he knew it was not her actual bodily presence we had all beheld. He had seen, I felt sure, what we had seen and was terrified of it. His explanation and suggestion were certainly plausible enough: he would pack up her clothes and have them ready, and it was natural that he did not want her to come inside the house at all. But it was not the thought of that which made the sweat to stand on his forehead, and his throat to gulp, but something very different. The thought haunted me; often I half dropped off to sleep, but as many times I woke again with the sense that there was something creeping up to the house, like the fog that was now thick outside my window, and seeking admittance. And often in these wakings, I heard from the room above, which was Lamp's, a soft footfall going backward and forward. It went to the window and then I heard the creak of the opening sash; then the window was closed again, and the blind drawn down over it. But toward morning I slept more soundly and woke to find him already in my room, deftly putting out my clothes.

Storely went off to the police station directly after breakfast. He had told Lamp to bring the car round from the garage which adjoined the house, for we were to spend the day on the links. The fog had quite cleared under a breath of north wind, the morning was of a crystalline brightness, and while waiting for Storely, I strolled down the street and out on to the riverside. In this radiant day of spring, I almost thought that my uneasy imaginings were but nightmare notions, as unreal as a dream. Certainly they had left the surface of my conscious mind, and I cared little whether they had dispersed altogether or were lurking in the shadows within, so long as they did not trouble me.

When I got back to the house, the car was standing at the door, and casually glancing into it, as I passed, I thought I saw that huddled up on the back seat was sprawling the figure of a woman. The impression was absolutely momentary, for at once it resolved itself into a medley of coat and rug with a patch of oval sunlight for a face. A good lesson, thought I, of the tricks the imagination can play, for clearly this was a piece of that nightmare stuff which had been troubling me, and which had no existence in fact.

It was dusk when we drew up at the door again that evening, after a salubrious day in the open. A tranquil pleasant fatigue possessed me. I looked forward to my bath and my dinner and cozy fireside hours before bed-time. Storely had passed into the house leaving the front door open, and I lingered on the threshold a minute, watching Lamp back the car into the garage. As I stood there, I felt some-

thing brush by me, and pass invisibly into the house. Simultaneously I heard Storely's voice from the hall inside call out "Hullo, what's that?" I came in, shutting the door.

"What was it?" I asked.

"I don't know. I was reading my letters at the table, when something brushed by me, and I thought it was you. But there was nothing to be seen. The door into the sitting-room swung open and closed again. Where's Lamp?"

"He's putting the car into the garage," I said.

"But something did go in there," he said. "Turn on the light."

I found the switch and turned it, and the dusky room leaped into brightness. But it was quite empty.

"Odd," he said. "It must have been a draft. But it felt more solid than that."

"It brushed by me too, as I stood in the doorway," I said.

"Of course it was a draft then," he said. "Strong eddies of air often come up this narrow street. We'll shut them all out."

We drew our chairs up near the fire, for the evening had turned chilly. I had looked forward to this drowsy hour, with the evening paper to glance at, and a book to doze over, but instead I found myself eagerly alert. But I could not give my attention to my book because something was going on far more arresting than anything which the world of books could contain. It was no subjective unrest that kept me thus on wires; it was that the whole of my mind was waiting for something quite outside myself to develop, and it, whatever it was, was in the room. It watched, it moved about, it waited, and now the air was growing misty and I supposed that the fog had formed again outside, and was leaking in. But when I went up to dress, I looked out from my bedroom window, and saw that the sky overhead was full of bright burning stars, and that the street below, though dark, was so clear that I could see the dew which had fallen and lay on the cobbles shimmering in the starlight.

During dinner I noticed that Storely as well as I was observing Lamp. The man was evidently not himself; ordinarily deft-handed and silent-footed, he clattered with the dishes, and when he stood waiting for us to eat our course, he kept glancing uneasily round. At the end of dinner, as he poured out a glass of port for his master he made some awkward jerk with his hand, and upset it. An impatient exclamation was on the tip of Storely's tongue, but he checked it.

"Anything the matter, Lamp?" he asked, as he mopped up the spilt wine. "Aren't you well?"

"No sir. I'm right enough," he said. "But it's queer how the house is full of fog. The kitchen: why you can hardly see across it."

PRESENTLY we were back in the sitting-room, where the chess-board was already set. The woman who came in to cook did not sleep in the house, and soon there came the tapping of her steps down the flagged kitchen passage, and the opening and shutting of the back door; we heard Lamp lock and bolt it as soon as she was gone. During the next hour, while our game was in progress, he must have come into the room half a dozen times; his hands trembled as he swept up the hearth, his face was ashen, and it was evident that he was in a state of acute nervous tension, and made every excuse to himself for coming into the room instead of biding alone in the kitchen. Finally Storely told him that we wanted nothing more that night, and that he could get to bed. But we heard him moving about the house overhead, and when an hour later we finished our game and went upstairs, he was still astir in the room above me.

I got to bed and instantly fell asleep, and woke again with the faint light of early dawn shining in

through the window knowing that some noise had aroused me. There was the sound of steps coming from the floor above, and they passed my door and went on downstairs into the hall. I got out of bed, turned on my light, and went to the door and opened it. But not a yard could I see in front of me, so dense was the fog that filled the passage. Yet somebody — were these not the steps of two people?— had just passed quickly by as if it was full daylight. Then suddenly from below came the sound of voices, and with a thrill of nameless horror I heard that one of them was the voice of a woman.

"So now you've got to come with me, James Lamp," it said, "and take me where you took me before. You'll drive me down in the car, as you drove me before, and you'll come down into the water where you threw me, and I'll be waiting for you there, so close and loving."

Then came the other voice. It was Lamp's voice, and it rose to a scream as it spoke.

"No, no," he cried. "No, not that! I won't come, I tell you. Ah, take your hand off me: it's hot as fire: I can't bear it."

"Come on then obediently," said the other. "It's cool in the water."

The door of Storely's room, just opposite mine, opened. I heard him click on the switch in the passage, and very faintly above our heads in the dense air there shone out, white but hardly luminous, the electric light from the ceiling.

"Ah, you've heard it too," he said, seeing me. "What is it? What's happening? There were voices and a yell. And there's the front door opened and shut again. Come down."

We groped our way along the passage, but on the stairs it was absolutely pitch-dark. There was a switch somewhere there but he could not find it, and he went back to his room to get a box of matches. With the help of that light he got hold of the switch, but even so we had to proceed with shuffling steps, so dense was the fog. We crossed the hall, and after fumbling at the front door, he threw it open, and there came in the faint clear light of the dawn. Even as we stood on the threshold, the motor emerged from the garage close by, and I saw that by the side of Lamp, who drove it, there sat a woman. It turned and went swiftly down the street toward the river.

"But, good God, what's happening?" cried Storely. "That's Lamp. But where is he going? And who was that woman with him? Couldn't you see?"

And in the gray light of morning we read the answering horror in each other's faces.

THE rest of the story, as it came out at the inquest held next day at Trench, is probably known to my readers. Storely's empty car was found by a laborer going out to his work, drawn up on the bridge across the river Inglis, and the deep pool below the sluice was dragged. Two bodies were found there, one of a woman, the other of James Lamp. The woman's body had evidently been in the water for several days; his only for a few hours. But her hands were so tightly locked round the throat of the man, that it was with difficulty that the two could be separated. In the woman's head was a wound caused by a revolver bullet; it had entered the back of her skull and was embedded in her brain. Medical evidence showed that she was certainly dead before she had been thrown into the water, and round her neck was a heavy iron weight. The body was quite recognizable, being that of Lamp's wife.

A Brief, Strange Story

The Magic-Maker

By AMELIA REYNOLDS LONG

MORTIMER smiled into his beard, and stirred the mixture in the crucible. "Soon he will be here, Pepin," he said to the little marmoset perched upon his shoulder; "this Hildebrandt who would have me renew his youth. . . . I knew a Hildebrandt once—back in the Golden Age when I was young. He was handsome, and his back had no hump, as mine has." His face hardened, and his voice grew bitter. "Women demand a comely face and well-formed person, Pepin."

The smart rap of a heavy stick upon oaken panels sent the echoes rocking about the vaulted ceiling. Mortimer crossed to the door, and opened it.

A man strode past him into the room. His dress paraded all the fopperies of youth, but his eyes were pouchy and his jowls were sagging. He had the unhealthy look of an old man who had spent his life in riotous living. He cast a curious glance around him, then flung his hat and gloves upon a table.

"Is it true that you have discovered the secret of youth and age, Dr. Mortimer?" he demanded abruptly.

"I told you so when I answered your letter, Lord Hildebrandt," replied Mortimer.

Hildebrandt jangled a fistful of gold pieces suggestively. "I suppose my name is not unknown to you," he remarked.

"No, it is not unknown to me." Mortimer regarded him from out the dark caverns that were his eyes. "In my youth I knew one of that name."

"What!" Hildebrandt started, and scrutinized him sharply. His eyes rested upon the misshapen hump between Mortimer's shoulders. "You are not——?"

"But he was not a mighty lord," finished Mortimer.

Hildebrandt released his breath in a sigh of relief. The hunchback apparently had not recognized him; no more than had he, upon first entering, recognized the hunchback. A look of cunning crept across his face.

"Then your other Hildebrandt could not have given you red gold, as I can," he said with assumed carelessness; "as I will give you for—shall we say a little medicine?"

Mortimer's face was hidden as he bent over his alembic. "I do not want your gold," he said. "I am an alchemist. All I ask in return for my elixir of youth is that you tell me why you want it."

Hildebrandt laughed coarsely. "Why does any man want youth?" he returned. "Women demand a comely face and well-formed person."

"Then there is a lady concerned?" asked Mortimer.

"A beauty," answered Hildebrandt enthusiastically, "and too innocent to realize her own charm. But the old man does not please her. Ah, Mortimer, she should have known me thirty years ago!" He guffawed.

"The Hildebrandt whom I knew also loved a lady," said Mortimer. "But his love was not deep; after he had married her, he left her to die."

His visitor fidgeted uneasily. "The incident seems to have impressed

you." He strove to make his tone casual.

"The lady was she whom I was to marry," answered Mortimer.

Hildebrandt was silent. He dared not risk detection by saying more. He watched Mortimer furtively. In the red glow from the retort, the alchemist's features had become a demoniac mask. The nobleman found himself shuddering as he looked at it.

"I wonder, Dr. Mortimer," he said at last, speaking to relieve the oppressiveness of the silence, "why you do not take this elixir of youth yourself. Is it true that a doctor can not be cured by his own medicine?"

Mortimer smiled. "I do not take it because I am wise," he said. "Youth is too painful, too volcanic. Nine-tenths of our follies are committed in our youth."

"And our sins?" asked Hildebrandt idly. "When are they committed?"

"At all times," Mortimer replied gravely.

He left the room, and returned with two flagons of beaten silver.

"In one," he said, holding them up, "is the elixir of youth; in the other, that of old age. Are you sure you want youth, Lord Hildebrandt? Are you positive?"

Hildebrandt's eyes grew greedy. "Positive?" he sniggered. "Who would not be positive—for this?"

He took from around his neck a locket which he opened and handed to Mortimer. In it was the pictured face of a young girl; a face with the innocence of a child and the grace of an angel. Mortimer had once known another face like that.

"Remember," he said, holding Hildebrandt's eyes with his, "it has been wisely said that a man is most utterly damned by the fulfilment of his dearest wish."

Hildebrandt laughed. "Then let me be damned," he returned.

An instant Mortimer hesitated. Then he closed the locket, and returned it to its owner. Uncorking one of the flagons, he poured part of its contents into a crystal beaker. The fluid scintillated like liquid emeralds.

"A pretty color," commented Hildebrandt; "the color of life."

"Two things, and two only, are green," said Mortimer; "young growing things, and festering mold." He poured the ichor into the crucible. There was a sharp report, and a puff of heavy black smoke arose and writhed its way to the brooding shadows of the ceiling. Mortimer chuckled; and the little marmoset, chattering with fear, sprang from its master's shoulder to seek safety on the ledge over the door.

Mortimer removed the alembic, and poured the hot liquid into a waiting chalice. "Drink," he said, extending it to Hildebrandt. The nobleman needed no urging.

"And now," said the alchemist, "you have only to sit in your chair and wait. The elixir works rapidly. Within an hour it will have altered you beyond recognition. While you wait, I will play for you."

He drew back the heavy curtains at one side of the room, exposing an organ. Seating himself before it, he began to play.

The first chords were hauntingly sweet, like the tender light that fills the sky at the close of a spring day. Hildebrandt scarcely heard them, so excited was he by the thing that was about to happen to him. Presently the music became troubled, and half-discords stole into its burthen. Gradually it crept into a minor strain of fear that worked its way into the small, high-pitched pipes of the instrument and went wailing about the chamber. Hildebrandt shivered uncomfortably. The long, black shadows in the corners darted toward and away from him. An unfelt draft stirred the velvet curtains that still covered three sides of the room. An unnatural chill was permeating the

air. He moved his chair closer to the brazier.

Suddenly the music broke into a wild macabre dance, pierced with eldritch yells and shrieks. It beat against the walls with the force of great wings. It swept through the chamber, taunting, gibbering, derisive. The marmoset screamed with terror, and pressed its little hands over its ears. Hildebrandt tried to rise, but the volume of sound pinned him to his chair; he tried to cry out, but it crammed his voice back into his throat. Then as abruptly as the revel of horror had begun, it was ended, giving place to the slow, cumbrous rhythm of a funeral march.

Hildebrandt's heart was beating to suffocation, and his breath whistled in his lungs. "Stop, stop!" he cried frantically. His voice was thin and cracked, so that he hardly recognized it. He put out a trembling hand; and as his eyes rested upon it, his brain reeled in horror. It was the bloodless, emaciated hand of a very old man!

Mortimer rose from the organ. "Did you think, Hildebrandt, that I did not know you?" he asked. "I suspected your identity even before you arrived. But you did not know me, or you would not have come, eh?" He regarded the other through half-closed, speculative eyes. "I had intended to give you the elixir of youth," he went on, "and let you drown yourself in your own folly. I would have done it had you not shown me the locket. But I could not let you drag down with you another so like—but let it suffice that I gave you the other elixir. You are an old, old man, Hildebrandt. In a few months you will be dead."

Hildebrandt began to screech unintelligibly for mercy; then his eye fell on the other flagon. Craftily he began to edge toward it.

Mortimer read his intention. With a single gesture he seized the flagon, wrenched out the cork, and poured its contents upon the hot coals of the brazier. There was a blinding flash of white light, and the flames leaped high in the air, then collapsed upon themselves. With a howl of despair, Hildebrandt clawed at the hot coals.

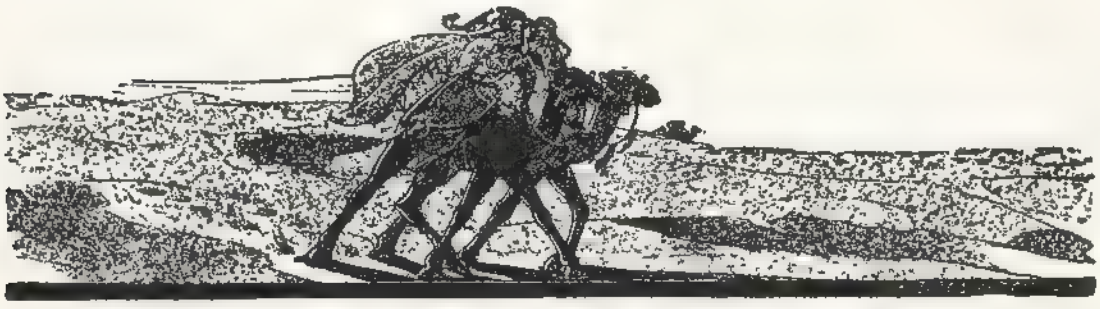
With the toe of his slipper Mortimer spurned back the puling, sniveling wretch at his feet. "You make a gratifying picture," he commented. "After all, this way is as satisfying as the other would have been."

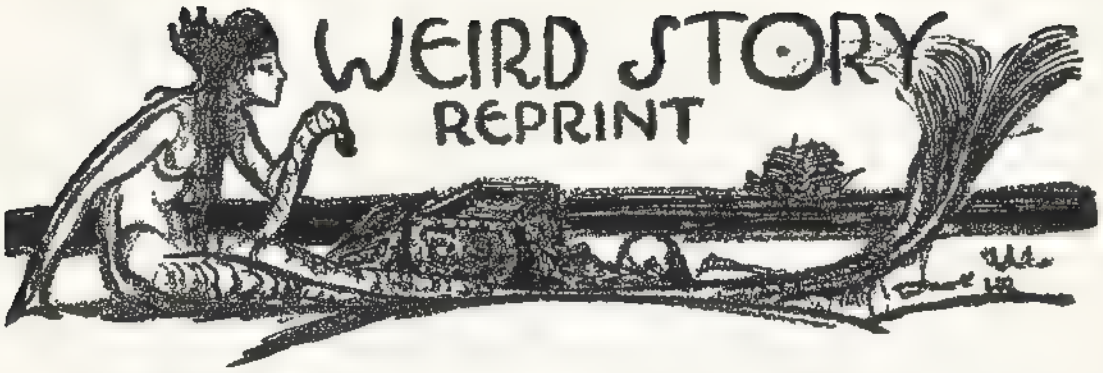
"You can't leave me like this," whined the dotard. "You couldn't leave me to die!"

"Old man," asked Mortimer, "can you go home alone, or shall I accompany you?"

Hopelessly Hildebrandt got to his feet, and took up the jaunty hat from the table. It fell down over his eyes with an air of ribald buffoonery. Leaning heavily upon his stick, he stumbled from the room.

Mortimer smiled silently into his beard.





*The Rats in the Walls**

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

ON JULY 16, 1923, I moved into Exham Priory after the last workman had finished his labors. The restoration had been a stupendous task, for little had remained of the deserted pile but a shell-like ruin; yet because it had been the seat of my ancestors I let no expense deter me. The place had not been inhabited since the reign of James the First, when a tragedy of intensely hideous, though largely unexplained, nature had struck down the master, five of his children, and several servants; and driven forth under a cloud of suspicion and terror the third son, my lineal progenitor and the only survivor of the abhorred line.

With this sole heir denounced as a murderer, the estate had reverted to the crown, nor had the accused man made any attempt to exculpate himself or regain his property. Shaken by some horror greater than that of conscience or the law, and expressing only a frantic wish to exclude the ancient edifice from his sight and memory, Walter de la Poer, eleventh Baron Exham, fled to Virginia and there founded the family which by the next century had become known as Delapore.

Exham Priory had remained untenanted, though later allotted to the estates of the Norrys family and much studied because of its peculiarly composite architecture; an architecture involving Gothic towers resting on a Saxon or Romanesque substructure, whose foundation in turn was of a still earlier order or blend of orders —Roman, and even Druidic or native Cymric, if legends speak truly. This foundation was a very singular thing, being merged on one side with the solid limestone of the precipice from whose brink the priory overlooked a desolate valley three miles west of the village of Anchester.

Architects and antiquarians loved to examine this strange relic of forgotten centuries, but the country folk hated it. They had hated it hundreds of years before, when my ancestors lived there, and they hated it now, with the moss and mold of abandonment on it. I had not been a day in Anchester before I knew I came of an accursed house. And this week workmen have blown up Exham Priory, and are busy obliterating the traces of its foundations.

THE bare statistics of my ancestry I had always known, together with the fact that my first American forebear had come to the colonies un-

*From WEIRD TALES for March, 1924.

der a strange cloud. Of details, however, I had been kept wholly ignorant through the policy of reticence always maintained by the Delapores. Unlike our planter neighbors, we seldom boasted of crusading ancestors or other mediæval and Renaissance heroes; nor was any kind of tradition handed down except what may have been recorded in the sealed envelope left before the Civil War by every squire to his eldest son for posthumous opening. The glories we cherished were those achieved since the migration; the glories of a proud and honorable, if somewhat reserved and unsocial Virginia line.

During the war our fortunes were extinguished and our whole existence changed by the burning of Carfax, our home on the banks of the James. My grandfather, advanced in years, had perished in that incendiary outrage, and with him the envelope that bound us all to the past. I can recall that fire today as I saw it then at the age of seven, with the Federal soldiers shouting, the women screaming, and the negroes howling and praying. My father was in the army, defending Richmond, and after many formalities my mother and I were passed through the lines to join him.

When the war ended we all moved north, whence my mother had come; and I grew to manhood, middle age, and ultimate wealth as a stolid Yankee. Neither my father nor I ever knew what our hereditary envelope had contained, and as I merged into the grayness of Massachusetts business life I lost all interest in the mysteries which evidently lurked far back in my family tree. Had I suspected their nature, how gladly would I have left Exham Priory to its moss, bats, and cobwebs!

My father died in 1904, but without any message to leave to me, or to my only child, Alfred, a motherless boy of ten. It was this boy who reversed the order of family information, for although I could give him only jesting conjectures about the past, he wrote me of some very interesting ancestral legends when the late war took him to England in 1917 as an aviation officer. Apparently the Delapores had a colorful and perhaps sinister history, for a friend of my son's, Captain Edward Norrys of the Royal Flying Corps, dwelt near the family seat at Anchester and related some peasant superstitions which few novelists could equal for wildness and incredibility. Norrys himself, of course, did not take them seriously; but they amused my son and made good material for his letters to me. It was this legendry which definitely turned my attention to my transatlantic heritage, and made me resolve to purchase and restore the family seat which Norrys showed to Alfred in its picturesque desertion, and offered to get for him at a surprizingly reasonable figure, since his own uncle was the present owner.

I bought Exham Priory in 1918, but was almost immediately distracted from my plans of restoration by the return of my son as a maimed invalid. During the two years that he lived I thought of nothing but his care, having even placed my business under the direction of partners.

In 1921, as I found myself bereaved and aimless, a retired manufacturer no longer young, I resolved to divert my remaining years with my new possession. Visiting Anchester in December, I was entertained by Captain Norrys, a plump, amiable young man who had thought much of my son, and secured his assistance in gathering plans and anecdotes to guide in the coming restoration. Exham Priory itself I saw without emotion, a jumble of tottering mediæval ruins covered with lichens and honeycombed with rooks' nests, perched perilously upon a precipice, and denuded of floors or other interior features save the stone walls of the separate towers.

As I gradually recovered the image of the edifice as it had been when my

ancestors left it over three centuries before, I began to hire workmen for the reconstruction. In every case I was forced to go outside the immediate locality, for the Anchester villagers had an almost unbelievable fear and hatred of the place. This sentiment was so great that it was sometimes communicated to the outside laborers, causing numerous desertions; whilst its scope appeared to include both the priory and its ancient family.

My son had told me that he was somewhat avoided during his visits because he was a de la Poer, and I now found myself subtly ostracized for a like reason until I convinced the peasants how little I knew of my heritage. Even then they sullenly disliked me, so that I had to collect most of the village traditions through the mediations of Norrys. What the people could not forgive, perhaps, was that I had come to restore a symbol so abhorrent to them; for, rationally or not, they viewed Exham Priory as nothing less than a haunt of fiends and werewolves.

PIECING together the tales which Norrys collected for me, and supplementing them with the accounts of several savants who had studied the ruins, I deduced that Exham Priory stood on the site of a prehistoric temple; a Druidical or ante-Druidical thing which must have been contemporary with Stonehenge. That indescribable rites had been celebrated there, few doubted, and there were unpleasant tales of the transference of these rites into the Cybele-worship which the Romans had introduced.

Inscriptions still visible in the subcellar bore such unmistakable letters as "DIV . . . OPS . . . MAGNA. MAT . . ." sign of the Magna Mater whose dark worship was once vainly forbidden to Roman citizens. Anchester had been the camp of the third Augustan legion, as many remains attest, and it was said that the temple of Cybele was splendid and thronged with worshippers who performed nameless ceremonies at the bidding of a Phrygian priest. Tales added that the fall of the old religion did not end the orgies at the temple, but that the priests lived on in the new faith without real change. Likewise was it said that the rites did not vanish with the Roman power, and that certain among the Saxons added to what remained of the temple, and gave it the essential outline it subsequently preserved, making it the center of a cult feared throughout the heptarchy. About 1000 A. D. the place is mentioned in a chronicle as being a substantial stone priory housing a strange and powerful monastic order and surrounded by extensive gardens which needed no walls to exclude a frightened populace. It was never destroyed by the Danes, though after the Norman Conquest it must have declined tremendously; since there was no impediment when Henry the Third granted the site to my ancestor, Gilbert de la Poer, First Baron Exham, in 1261.

Of my family before this date there is no evil report, but something strange must have happened then. In one chronicle there is a reference to a de la Poer as "cursed of God" in 1307, whilst village legendry had nothing but evil and frantic fear to tell of the castle that went up on the foundations of the old temple and priory. The fireside tales were of the most grisly description, all the ghastlier because of their frightened reticence and cloudy evasiveness. They represented my ancestors as a race of hereditary dæmons beside whom Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade would seem the veriest tyros, and hinted whisperingly at their responsibility for the occasional disappearances of villagers through several generations.

The worst characters, apparently, were the barons and their direct heirs: at least, most was whispered

about these. If of healthier inclinations, it was said, an heir would early and mysteriously die to make way for another more typical scion. There seemed to be an inner cult in the family, presided over by the head of the house, and sometimes closed except to a few members. Temperament rather than ancestry was evidently the basis of this cult, for it was entered by several who married into the family. Lady Margaret Trevor from Cornwall, wife of Godfrey, the second son of the fifth baron, became a favorite bane of children all over the countryside, and the dæmon heroine of a particularly horrible old ballad not yet extinct near the Welsh border. Preserved in balladry, too, though not illustrating the same point, is the hideous tale of Lady Mary de la Poer, who shortly after her marriage to the Earl of Shrewsfield was killed by him and his mother, both of the slayers being absolved and blessed by the priest to whom they confessed what they dared not repeat to the world.

These myths and ballads, typical as they were of crude superstition, repelled me greatly. Their persistence, and their application to so long a line of my ancestors, were especially annoying; whilst the imputations of monstrous habits proved unpleasantly reminiscent of the one known scandal of my immediate forebears—the case of my cousin, young Randolph Delapore of Carfax, who went among the negroes and became a voodoo priest after he returned from the Mexican War.

I was much less disturbed by the vaguer tales of wails and howlings in the barren, windswept valley beneath the limestone cliff; of the graveyard stenches after the spring rains; of the floundering, squealing white thing on which Sir John Clave's horse had trod one night in a lonely field; and of the servant who had gone mad at what he saw in the priory in the full light of day. These things were hackneyed spectral lore, and I was at that time a pronounced skeptic. The accounts of vanished peasants were less to be dismissed, though not especially significant in view of mediæval custom. Prying curiosity meant death, and more than one severed head had been publicly shown on the bastions—now effaced—around Exham Priory.

A few of the tales were exceedingly picturesque, and made me wish I had learnt more of comparative mythology in my youth. There was, for instance, the belief that a legion of bat-winged devils kept witches' sabbath each night at the priory—a legion whose sustenance might explain the disproportionate abundance of coarse vegetables harvested in the vast gardens. And, most vivid of all, there was the dramatic epic of the rats—the scampering army of obscene vermin which had burst forth from the castle three months after the tragedy that doomed it to desertion—the lean, filthy, ravenous army which had swept all before it and devoured fowl, cats, dogs, sheep, and even two hapless human beings before its fury was spent. Around that unforgettable rodent army a whole separate cycle of myths revolves, for it scattered among the village homes and brought curses and horrors in its train.

Such was the lore that assailed me as I pushed to completion, with an elderly obstinacy, the work of restoring my ancestral home. It must not be imagined for a moment that these tales formed my principal psychological environment. On the other hand, I was constantly praised and encouraged by Captain Norrys and the antiquarians who surrounded and aided me. When the task was done, over two years after its commencement, I viewed the great rooms, wainscotted walls, vaulted ceilings, mullioned windows, and broad staircases with a pride which fully compensated for the prodigious expense of the restoration.

Every attribute of the Middle Ages was cunningly reproduced, and the

new parts blended perfectly with the original walls and foundations. The seat of my fathers was complete, and I looked forward to redeeming at last the local fame of the line which ended in me. I would reside here permanently, and prove that a de la Poer (for I had adopted again the original spelling of the name) need not be a fiend. My comfort was perhaps augmented by the fact that, although Exham Priory was mediævally fitted, its interior was in truth wholly new and free from old vermin and old ghosts alike.

AS I HAVE said, I moved in on July 16, 1923. My household consisted of seven servants and nine cats, of which latter species I am particularly fond. My eldest cat, "Nigger-Man," was seven years old and had come with me from my home in Bolton, Massachusetts; the others I had accumulated whilst living with Captain Norrys' family during the restoration of the priory.

For five days our routine proceeded with the utmost placidity, my time being spent mostly in the codification of old family data. I had now obtained some very circumstantial accounts of the final tragedy and flight of Walter de la Poer, which I conceived to be the probable contents of the hereditary paper lost in the fire at Carfax. It appeared that my ancestor was accused with much reason of having killed all the other members of his household, except four servant confederates, in their sleep, about two weeks after a shocking discovery which changed his whole demeanor, but which, except by implication, he disclosed to no one save perhaps the servants who assisted him and afterward fled beyond reach.

This deliberate slaughter, which included a father, three brothers, and two sisters, was largely condoned by the villagers, and so slackly treated by the law that its perpetrator escaped honored, unharmed, and undisguised to Virginia; the general whispered sentiment being that he had purged the land of an immemorial curse. What discovery had prompted an act so terrible, I could scarcely even conjecture. Walter de la Poer must have known for years the sinister tales about his family, so that this material could have given him no fresh impulse. Had he, then, witnessed some appalling ancient rite, or stumbled upon some frightful and revealing symbol in the priory or its vicinity? He was reputed to have been a shy, gentle youth in England. In Virginia he seemed not so much hard or bitter as harassed and apprehensive. He was spoken of in the diary of another gentleman adventurer, Francis Harley of Bellview, as a man of unexampled justice, honor and delicacy.

On July 22 occurred the first incident which, though lightly dismissed at the time, takes on a preternatural significance in relation to later events. It was so simple as to be almost negligible, and could not possibly have been noticed under the circumstances; for it must be recalled that since I was in a building practically fresh and new except for the walls, and surrounded by a well-balanced staff of servitors, apprehension would have been absurd despite the locality.

What I afterward remembered is merely this—that my old black cat, whose moods I know so well, was undoubtedly alert and anxious to an extent wholly out of keeping with his natural character. He roved from room to room, restless and disturbed, and sniffed constantly about the walls which formed part of the old Gothic structure. I realize how trite this sounds—like the inevitable dog in the ghost story, which always growls before his master sees the sheeted figure—yet I can not consistently suppress it.

The following day a servant complained of restlessness among all the cats in the house. He came to me in

my study, a lofty west room on the second story, with groined arches, black oak paneling, and a triple Gothic window overlooking the limestone cliff and desolate valley; and even as he spoke I saw the jetty form of Nigger-Man creeping along the west wall and scratching at the new panels which overlaid the ancient stone.

I told the man that there must be some singular odor or emanation from the old stonework, imperceptible to human senses, but affecting the delicate organs of cats even through the new woodwork. This I truly believed, and when the fellow suggested the presence of mice or rats, I mentioned that there had been no rats there for three hundred years, and that even the field mice of the surrounding country could hardly be found in these high walls, where they had never been known to stray. That afternoon I called on Captain Norrys, and he assured me that it would be quite incredible for field mice to infest the priory in such a sudden and unprecedented fashion.

That night, dispensing as usual with a valet, I retired in the west tower chamber which I had chosen as my own, reached from the study by a stone staircase and short gallery—the former partly ancient, the latter entirely restored. This room was circular, very high, and without wainscotting, being hung with arras which I had myself chosen in London.

Seeing that Nigger-Man was with me, I shut the heavy Gothic door and retired by the light of the electric bulbs which so cleverly counterfeited candles, finally switching off the light and sinking on the carved and canopied four-poster, with the venerable cat in his accustomed place across my feet. I did not draw the curtains, but gazed out at the narrow north window which I faced. There was a suspicion of aurora in the sky, and the delicate traceries of the window were pleasantly silhouetted.

At some time I must have fallen quietly asleep, for I recall a distinct sense of leaving strange dreams when the cat started violently from his placid position. I saw him in the faint auroral glow, head strained forward, forefeet on my ankles, and hind feet stretched behind. He was looking intensely at a point on the wall somewhat west of the window, a point which to my eye had nothing to mark it, but toward which all my attention was now directed.

And as I watched, I knew that Nigger-Man was not vainly excited. Whether the arras actually moved I can not say. I think it did, very slightly. But what I can swear to is that behind it I heard a low, distinct scurrying as of rats or mice. In a moment the cat had jumped bodily on the screening tapestry, bringing the affected section to the floor with his weight, and exposing a damp, ancient wall of stone; patched here and there by the restorers, and devoid of any trace of rodent prowlers.

Nigger-Man raced up and down the floor by this part of the wall, clawing the fallen arras and seemingly trying at times to insert a paw between the wall and the oaken floor. He found nothing, and after a time returned warily to his place across my feet. I had not moved, but I did not sleep again that night.

In the morning I questioned all the servants, and found that none of them had noticed anything unusual save that the cook remembered the actions of a cat which had rested on her window-sill. This cat had howled at some unknown hour of the night, awaking the cook in time for her to see him dart purposefully out of the open door down the stairs. I drowsed away the noontime, and in the afternoon called again on Captain Norrys, who became exceedingly interested in what I told him. The odd incidents—so slight yet so curious—appealed to his sense of the picturesque, and elicited from him a number of reminiscences of

local ghostly lore. We were genuinely perplexed at the presence of rats, and Norrys lent me some traps and paris-green, which I had the servants place in strategic localities when I returned.

I RETIRED early, being very sleepy, but was harassed by dreams of the most horrible sort. I seemed to be looking down from an immense height upon a twilit grotto, knee-deep with filth, where a white-bearded dæmon swineherd drove about with his staff a flock of fungous, flabby beasts whose appearance filled me with unutterable loathing. Then, as the swineherd paused and nodded over his task, a mighty swarm of rats rained down on the stinking abyss and fell to devouring beasts and man alike.

From this terrific vision I was abruptly awaked by the motions of Nigger-Man, who had been sleeping as usual across my feet. This time I did not have to question the source of his snarls and hisses, and of the fear which made him sink his claws into my ankle, unconscious of their effect; for on every side of the chamber the walls were alive with nauseous sound —the verminous slithering of ravenous, gigantic rats. There was now no aurora to show the state of the arras—the fallen section of which had been replaced—but I was not too frightened to switch on the light.

As the bulbs leapt into radiance I saw a hideous shaking all over the tapestry, causing the somewhat peculiar designs to execute a singular dance of death. This motion disappeared almost at once, and the sound with it. Springing out of bed, I poked at the arras with the long handle of a warming-pan that rested near, and lifted one section to see what lay beneath. There was nothing but the patched stone wall, and even the cat had lost his tense realization of abnormal presences. When I examined the circular trap that had been placed in the room, I found all of the openings sprung, though no trace remained of what had been caught and had escaped.

Further sleep was out of the question, so, lighting a candle, I opened the door and went out in the gallery toward the stairs to my study, Nigger-Man following at my heels. Before we had reached the stone steps, however, the cat darted ahead of me and vanished down the ancient flight. As I descended the stairs myself, I became suddenly aware of sounds in the great room below; sounds of a nature which could not be mistaken.

The oak-paneled walls were alive with rats, scampering and milling, whilst Nigger-Man was racing about with the fury of a baffled hunter. Reaching the bottom, I switched on the light, which did not this time cause the noise to subside. The rats continued their riot, stampeding with such force and distinctness that I could finally assign to their motions a definite direction. These creatures, in numbers apparently inexhaustible, were engaged in one stupendous migration from inconceivable heights to some depth conceivably, or inconceivably, below.

I now heard steps in the corridor, and in another moment two servants pushed open the massive door. They were searching the house for some unknown source of disturbance which had thrown all the cats into a snarling panic and caused them to plunge precipitately down several flights of stairs and squat, yowling, before the closed door to the sub-cellar. I asked them if they had heard the rats, but they replied in the negative. And when I turned to call their attention to the sounds in the panels, I realized that the noise had ceased.

With the two men I went down to the door of the sub-cellar, but found the cats already dispersed. Later, I resolved I would explore the crypt below; but for the present I merely made a round of the traps. All were sprung, yet all were tenantless. Satisfying myself that no one had heard

the rats save the felines and me, I sat in my study till morning, thinking profoundly, and recalling every scrap of legend I had unearthed concerning the building I inhabited.

I SLEPT some in the forenoon, leaning back in the one comfortable library chair which my mediæval plan of furnishing could not banish. Later I telephoned to Captain Norrys, who came over and helped me explore the sub-cellar.

Absolutely nothing untoward was found, although we could not repress a thrill at the knowledge that this vault was built by Roman hands. Every low arch and massive pillar was Roman—not the debased Romanesque of the bungling Saxons, but the severe and harmonious classicism of the age of the Cæsars; indeed, the walls abounded with inscriptions familiar to the antiquarians who had repeatedly explored the place—things like "P. GETAE. PROP . . . TEMP . . . DONA . . ." and "L. PRAEC . . . VS . . . PONTIFI . . . ATYS . . ."

The reference to Atys made me shiver, for I had read Catullus and knew something of the hideous rites of the Eastern god, whose worship was so mixed with that of Cybele. Norrys and I, by the light of lanterns, tried to interpret the odd and nearly effaced designs on certain irregularly rectangular blocks of stone generally held to be altars, but could make nothing of them. We remembered that one pattern, a sort of rayed sun, was held by students to imply a non-Roman origin, suggesting that these altars had merely been adopted by the Roman priests from some older and perhaps aboriginal temple on the same site. On one of these blocks were some brown stains which made me wonder. The largest, in the center of the room, had certain features on the upper surface which indicated its connection with fire—probably burnt offerings.

Such were the sights in that crypt before whose door the cats had howled, and where Norrys and I now determined to pass the night. Couches were brought down by the servants, who were told not to mind any nocturnal actions of the cats, and Nigger-Man was admitted as much for help as for companionship. We decided to keep the great oak door—a modern reproduction with slits for ventilation—tightly closed; and, with this attended to, we retired with lanterns still burning to await whatever might occur.

The vault was very deep in the foundations of the priory, and undoubtedly far down on the face of the beetling limestone cliff overlooking the waste valley. That it had been the goal of the scuffling and unexplainable rats I could not doubt, though why, I could not tell. As we lay there expectantly, I found my vigil occasionally mixed with half-formed dreams from which the uneasy motions of the cat across my feet would rouse me.

These dreams were not wholesome, but horribly like the one I had had the night before. I saw again the twilit grotto, and the swineherd with his unmentionable fungous beasts wallowing in filth, and as I looked at these things they seemed nearer and more distinct—so distinct that I could almost observe their features. Then I did observe the flabby features of one of them—and awaked with such a scream that Nigger-Man started up, whilst Captain Norrys, who had not slept, laughed considerably. Norrys might have laughed more—or perhaps less—had he known what it was that made me scream. But I did not remember myself till later. Ultimate horror often paralyzes memory in a merciful way.

Norrys waked me when the phenomena began. Out of the same frightful dream I was called by his gentle shaking and his urging to listen to the cats. Indeed, there was much to listen to, for beyond the

closed door at the head of the stone steps was a veritable nightmare of feline yelling and clawing, whilst Nigger-Man, unmindful of his kindred outside, was running excitedly around the bare stone walls, in which I heard the same babel of scurrying rats that had troubled me the night before.

An acute terror now rose within me, for here were anomalies which nothing normal could well explain. These rats, if not the creatures of a madness which I shared with the cats alone, must be burrowing and sliding in Roman walls I had thought to be of solid limestone blocks . . . unless perhaps the action of water through more than seventeen centuries had eaten winding tunnels which rodent bodies had worn clear and ample. . . . But even so, the spectral horror was no less; for if these were living vermin why did not Norrys hear their disgusting commotion? Why did he urge me to watch Nigger-Man and listen to the cats outside, and why did he guess wildly and vaguely at what could have aroused them?

By the time I had managed to tell him, as rationally as I could, what I thought I was hearing, my ears gave me the last fading impression of the scurrying; which had retreated *still downward,* far underneath this deepest of sub-cellars, till it seemed as if the whole cliff below were riddled with questing rats. Norrys was not as skeptical as I had anticipated, but instead seemed profoundly moved. He motioned to me to notice that the cats at the door had ceased their clamor, as if giving up the rats for lost; whilst Nigger-Man had a burst of renewed restlessness, and was clawing frantically around the bottom of the large stone altar in the center of the room, which was nearer Norrys' couch than mine.

My fear of the unknown was at this point very great. Something astounding had occurred, and I saw that Captain Norrys, a younger, stouter, and presumably more naturally materialistic man, was affected fully as much as myself—perhaps because of his lifelong and intimate familiarity with local legend. We could for the moment do nothing but watch the old black cat as he pawed with decreasing fervor at the base of the altar, occasionally looking up and mewing to me in that persuasive manner which he used when he wished me to perform some favor for him.

Norrys now took a lantern close to the altar and examined the place where Nigger-Man was pawing; silently kneeling and scraping away the lichens of centuries which joined the massive pre-Roman block to the tesselated floor. He did not find anything, and was about to abandon his efforts when I noticed a trivial circumstance which made me shudder, even though it implied nothing more than I had already imagined.

I told him of it, and we both looked at its almost imperceptible manifestation with the fixedness of fascinated discovery and acknowledgment. It was only this—that the flame of the lantern set down near the altar was slightly but certainly flickering from a draft of air which it had not before received, and which came indubitably from the crevices between floor and altar where Norrys was scraping away the lichens.

We spent the rest of the night in the brilliantly lighted study, nervously discussing what we should do next. The discovery that some vault deeper than the deepest known masonry of the Romans underlay this accursed pile; some vault unsuspected by the curious antiquarians of three centuries; would have been sufficient to excite us without any background of the sinister. As it was, the fascination became twofold; and we paused in doubt whether to abandon our search and quit the priory for ever in superstitious caution, or to gratify our sense of adventure and brave whatever horrors might await us in the unknown depths.

By morning we had compromised, and decided to go to London to gather a group of archeologists and scientific men fit to cope with the mystery. It should be mentioned that before leaving the sub-cellar we had vainly tried to move the central altar which we now recognized as the gate to a new pit of nameless fear. What secret would open the gate, wiser men than we would have to find.

During many days in London Captain Norrys and I presented our facts, conjectures, and legendry anecdotes to five eminent authorities, all men who could be trusted to respect any family disclosures which future explorations might develop. We found most of them little disposed to scoff, but, instead, intensely interested and sincerely sympathetic. It is hardly necessary to name them all, but I may say that they included Sir William Brinton, whose excavations in the Troad excited most of the world in their day. As we all took the train for Anchester I felt myself poised on the brink of frightful revelations, a sensation symbolized by the air of mourning among the many Americans at the unexpected death of the President on the other side of the world.

ON THE evening of August 7th we reached Exham Priory, where the servants assured me that nothing unusual had occurred. The cats, even old Nigger-Man, had been perfectly placid; and not a trap in the house had been sprung. We were to begin exploring on the following day, awaiting which I assigned well-appointed rooms to all my guests.

I myself retired in my own tower chamber, with Nigger-Man across my feet. Sleep came quickly, but hideous dreams assailed me. There was a vision of a Roman feast like that of Trimalchio, with a horror in a covered platter. Then came that damnable, recurrent thing about the swineherd and his filthy drove in the twilit grotto. Yet when I awoke it was full daylight, with normal sounds in the house below. The rats, living or spectral, had not troubled me; and Nigger-Man was still quietly asleep. On going down, I found that the same tranquillity had prevailed elsewhere; a condition which one of the assembled savants—a fellow named Thornton, devoted to the psychic—rather absurdly laid to the fact that I had now been shown the thing which certain forces had wished to show me.

All was now ready, and at eleven a. m. our entire group of seven men, bearing powerful electric searchlights and implements of excavation, went down to the sub-cellar and bolted the door behind us. Nigger-Man was with us, for the investigators found no occasion to despise his excitability, and were indeed anxious that he be present in case of obscure rodent manifestations. We noted the Roman inscriptions and unknown altar designs only briefly, for three of the savants had already seen them, and all knew their characteristics. Prime attention was paid to the momentous central altar, and within an hour Sir William Brinton had caused it to tilt backward, balanced by some unknown species of counterweight.

There now lay revealed such a horror as would have overwhelmed us had we not been prepared. Through a nearly square opening in the tiled floor, sprawling on a flight of stone steps so prodigiously worn that it was little more than an inclined plane at the center, was a ghastly array of human or semi-human bones. Those which retained their collocation as skeletons showed attitudes of panic fear, and over all were the marks of rodent gnawing. The skulls denoted nothing short of utter idiocy, cretinism, or primitive semi-apedom.

Above the hellishly littered steps arched a descending passage seemingly chiseled from the solid rock, and conducting a current of air. This current was not a sudden and noxious rush as from a closed vault, but a

cool breeze with something of freshness in it. We did not pause long, but shiveringly began to clear a passage down the steps. It was then that Sir William, examining the hewn walls, made the odd observation that the passage, according to the direction of the strokes, must have been chiseled *from beneath.*

I MUST be very deliberate now, and choose my words.

After plowing down a few steps amidst the gnawed bones we saw that there was light ahead; not any mystic phosphorescence, but a filtered daylight which could not come except from unknown fissures in the cliff that overlooked the waste valley. That such fissures had escaped notice from outside was hardly remarkable, for not only is the valley wholly uninhabited, but the cliff is so high and beetling that only an aeronaut could study its face in detail. A few steps more, and our breaths were literally snatched from us by what we saw; so literally that Thornton, the psychic investigator, actually fainted in the arms of the dazed man who stood behind him. Norrys, his plump face utterly white and flabby, simply cried out inarticulately; whilst I think that what I did was to gasp or hiss, and cover my eyes.

The man behind me—the only one of the party older than I—croaked the hackneyed "My God!" in the most cracked voice I ever heard. Of seven cultivated men, only Sir William Brinton retained his composure, a thing the more to his credit because he led the party and must have seen the sight first.

It was a twilit grotto of enormous height, stretching away farther than any eye could see; a subterraneous world of limitless mystery and horrible suggestion. There were buildings and other architectural remains —in one terrified glance I saw a weird pattern of tumuli, a savage circle of monoliths, a low-domed Roman ruin, a sprawling Saxon pile, and an early English edifice of wood—but all these were dwarfed by the ghoulish spectacle presented by the general surface of the ground. For yards about the steps extended an insane tangle of human bones, or bones at least as human as those on the steps. Like a foamy sea they stretched, some fallen apart, but others wholly or partly articulated as skeletons; these latter invariably in postures of daemoniac frenzy, either fighting off some menace or clutching other forms with cannibal intent.

When Dr. Trask, the anthropologist, stooped to classify the skulls, he found a degraded mixture which utterly baffled him. They were mostly lower than the Piltdown man in the scale of evolution, but in every case definitely human. Many were of higher grade, and a very few were the skulls of supremely and sensitively developed types. All the bones were gnawed, mostly by rats, but somewhat by others of the half-human drove. Mixed with them were many tiny bones of rats—fallen members of the lethal army which closed the ancient epic.

I wonder that any man among us lived and kept his sanity through that hideous day of discovery. Not Hoffmann or Huysmans could conceive a scene more wildly incredible, more frenetically repellent, or more Gothically grotesque than the twilit grotto through which we seven staggered; each stumbling on revelation after revelation, and trying to keep for the nonce from thinking of the events which must have taken place there three hundred, or a thousand, or two thousand, or ten thousand years ago. It was the antechamber of hell, and poor Thornton fainted again when Trask told him that some of the skeleton things must have descended as quadrupeds through the last twenty or more generations.

Horror piled on horror as we began to interpret the architectural remains.

The quadruped things—with their occasional recruits from the biped class—had been kept in stone pens, out of which they must have broken in their last delirium of hunger or rat-fever. There had been great herds of them, evidently fattened on the coarse vegetables whose remains could be found as a sort of poisonous ensilage at the bottom of huge stone bins older than Rome. I knew now why my ancestors had had such excessive gardens—would to heaven I could forget! The purpose of the herds I did not have to ask.

Sir William, standing with his searchlight in the Roman ruin, translated aloud the most shocking ritual I have ever known; and told of the diet of the antediluvian cult which the priests of Cybele found and mingled with their own. Norrys, used as he was to the trenches, could not walk straight when he came out of the English building. It was a butcher shop and kitchen—he had expected that—but it was too much to see familiar English implements in such a place, and to read familiar English *graffiti* there, some as recent as 1610. I could not go in that building—that building whose dæmon activities were stopped only by the dagger of my ancestor Walter de la Poer.

What I did venture to enter was the low Saxon building, whose oaken door had fallen, and there I found a terrible row of ten stone cells with rusty bars. Three had tenants, all skeletons of high grade, and on the bony forefinger of one I found a seal ring with my own coat-of-arms. Sir William found a vault with far older cells below the Roman chapel, but these cells were empty. Below them was a low crypt with cases of formally arranged bones, some of them bearing terrible parallel inscriptions carved in Latin, Greek and the tongue of Phrygia.

MEANWHILE, Dr. Trask had opened one of the prehistoric tumuli, and brought to light skulls which were slightly more human than a gorilla's and which bore indescribable ideographic carvings. Through all this horror my cat stalked unperturbed. Once I saw him monstrously perched atop a mountain of bones, and wondered at the secret that might lie behind his yellow eyes.

Having grasped to some slight degree the frightful revelations of this twilight area—an area so hideously foreshadowed by my recurrent dream—we turned to that apparently boundless depth of midnight cavern where no ray of light from the cliff could penetrate. We shall never know what sightless Stygian worlds yawn beyond the little distance we went, for it was decided that such secrets are not good for mankind. But there was plenty to engross us close at hand, for we had not gone far before the searchlights showed that accursed infinity of pits in which the rats had feasted, and whose sudden lack of replenishment had driven the ravenous rodent army first to turn on the living herds of starving things, and then to burst forth from the priory in that historic orgy of devastation which the peasants will never forget.

God! those carrion black pits of sawed, picked bones and opened skulls! Those nightmare chasms choked with the pithecanthropoid, Celtic, Roman, and English bones of countless unhallowed centuries! Some of them were full, and none can say how deep they had once been. Others were still bottomless to our searchlights, and peopled by unnamable fancies. What, I thought, of the hapless rats that stumbled into such traps amidst the blackness of their quests in this grisly Tartarus?

Once my foot slipped near a horribly yawning brink, and I had a

moment of ecstatic fear. I must have been musing a long time, for I could not see any of the party but the plump Captain Norrys. Then there came a sound from that inky, boundless, farther distance that I thought I knew; and I saw my old black cat dart past me like a winged Egyptian god, straight into the illimitable gulf of the unknown. But I was not far behind, for there was no doubt after another second. It was the eldritch scurrying of those fiend-born rats, always questing for new horrors, and determined to lead me on even unto those grinning caverns of earth's center where Nyarlathotep, the mad faceless god, howls blindly in the darkness to the piping of two amorphous idiot flute-players.

My searchlight expired, but still I ran. I heard voices, and yowls, and echoes, but above all there gently rose that impious, insidious scurrying; gently rising, rising, as a stiff bloated corpse gently rises above an oily river that flows under endless onyx bridges to a black, putrid sea.

Something bumped into me—something soft and plump. It must have been the rats; the viscous, gelatinous, ravenous army that feast on the dead and the living. . . . Why shouldn't rats eat a de la Poer as a de la Poer eats forbidden things? . . . The war ate my boy, damn them all . . . and the Yanks ate Carfax with flames and burnt Grandsire Delapore and the secret . . . No, no, I tell you, I am *not* that dæmon swineherd in the twilit grotto! It was *not* Edward Norrys' fat face on that flabby, fungous thing! Who says I am a de la Poer? He lived, but my boy died! . . . Shall a Norrys hold the lands of a de la Poer? . . . It's voodoo, I tell you . . . that spotted snake . . . Curse you, Thornton, I'll teach you to faint at what my family do! . . . 'Sblood, thou stinkard, I'll learn ye how to gust . . . wolde ye swynke me thilke wys? . . . *Magna Mater! Magna Mater! . . . Atys . . . Dia ad aghaidh 's ad aodaun . . . agus bas dunach ort! Dhonas 's dholas ort, agus leat-sa! . . . Ungl . . . nngl . . . rrrlh . . . chchch.* . . .

That is what they say I said when they found me in the blackness after three hours; found me crouching in the blackness over the plump, half-eaten body of Captain Norrys, with my own cat leaping and tearing at my throat. Now they have blown up Exham Priory, taken my Nigger-Man away from me, and shut me into this barred room at Hanwell with fearful whispers about my heredity and experiences. Thornton is in the next room, but they prevent me from talking to him. They are trying, too, to suppress most of the facts concerning the priory. When I speak of poor Norrys they accuse me of a hideous thing, but they must know that I did not do it. They must know it was the rats; the slithering, scurrying rats whose scampering will never let me sleep; the dæmon rats that race behind the padding in this room and beckon me down to greater horrors than I have ever known; the rats they can never hear; the rats, the rats in the walls!

The Empty Road

(Continued from page 768)

the lights of the town twinkled gayly. In its slip on the East River Stanley thought he glimpsed the *Celtic*, which was to take him to London in the morning. Odd! He gasped, elated with the wonder of it all.

"It's chilly here," said the host, still resting his fingers on the table-top. "We will return."

As he spoke they were again in the warm atmosphere of the dining-hall.

"And my reward if I join you?" queried Stanley, still on his feet.

"Power beyond your wildest dreams, you fool!" shouted his host. "An equal place with us in the realm of free spirits. Why, we shall be as the gods of old and rule the world as Jupiter and his favorites did from Parnassus. We can defy death. We can be lords of life itself."

For some reason Warden still hesitated. Although the theory seemed real enough, it was beyond his grasp —just as the fourth dimension was. It sounded magnificent and yet—and yet—he wanted something tangible.

Brown seemed to read his mind.

"Oh, I see," he nodded, his black eyes sparkling evilly. "Doubting Thomas wants something real—something alive and within his limits. You will outgrow that, but in the meantime—Mathy, see what you can do for this youngster in the way of a tangible reward for his rebellion."

THE host sat down slowly and the author rose in his stead. Again his yellow, cigarette-stained fingers writhed upon the back of his chair as he smiled wolfishly upon the gathering.

"I believe it would not be amiss, after this wonderful evening," he breathed, scarcely audibly, "if we had a little glimpse of pleasure and youth and beauty. I have in mind a scene from my new novel, *The Otherworldling*, which I shall make real to you."

He paused for effect, lit a long cigarette which was speckled with tiny spots of color, like a robin's egg, then continued reflectively, as his eyes roved over his auditors.

"Let us say we are in a world where evolution has taken a different trend, where the flowers have developed beautiful, semi-human bodies; where a man can float in a poppy daze without the unpleasant after-effects; where beauty is exotic and supreme; where the ones we love are transformed into beings we can possess voluptuously and without restraint."

His voice trailed off. His face seemed to shrink and harden. Only his widely spaced green eyes seemed alive as they blinked slowly. With a shock Stanley observed that their pupils dilated vertically like those of a cat.

As he stared the walls and table seemed to dissolve and take new forms. The night vanished. A great, warm sun caressed him. With the other guests he found himself wandering in a bower of giant flowers. A sweet, penetrating aroma, which seemed to have been pressed from all the blooms that ever had opened, swept over them.

He felt a touch on his elbow and turned to behold the flower-women. Strangely human they were, as they swayed shoulder-high on their slender stalks—nodding, bowing in the breeze, smiling gayly the while like ladies in some old, old cotillion. Their slender, naked bodies glowed pinkly in the sunshine, exquisite and beautiful. Their scarlet lips seemed begging for love. But their eyes were dead! Now and then one, stirred by the scented zephyrs, would break from her mooring, in the midst of what seemed a

gigantic rose, and drift toward them, arms outstretched.

"These are but the figments of my imagination," Stanley heard Mathy's voice crooning softly beside him. "They have no being of their own, and are built by me only for your delectation. They are made for love. Have pity upon them."

But the effect upon Stanley was not what the author evidently had expected. Something within him seemed fighting desperately for air. His old horror of flowers swept over him. This sticky sweetness reminded him nauseatingly of the time when he had been buried under the roses and had fought the petals and thorns and entangling roots for life. He panted for breath. He wanted to scream, to run wildly down this jewel-strewn path.

"But I see Mr. Warden is not yet satisfied," the silken, stubborn voice droned on. "Perhaps he dreams of Jerry, who is not here. Oh, yes, we know of Jerry. A charming maiden, but puritanical. We will place her here and see the effect. Look!"

And, as he turned a corner of the path, Stanley beheld in the center of a giant yellow rose the likeness of Jerry swaying slowly toward him. As beautiful as ever she was, yet changed, as when one sees the face of a friend in a nightmare, as if she had been "crossed" with a flower by some devil's chemistry.

"Jerry!" he gasped.

Slowly her face turned toward him, as gradually as when a sunflower swings toward the sun.

He shrieked with horror. It was the face of a saint in purgatory; of a soul in its death throes.

"Do not be foolish," intoned Mathy's voice, into which had crept a faint tinge of menace. "The silly girl seems to take it hard, but she will grow used to it and become happy here in this garden, with the perfumes, the sun, the other flower maidens—and you. She will be your slave for as long as you wish. When you tire of her she will—pass on. Pluck your posy, my boy, and amuse yourself till dawn."

With a cry of anguish Stanley hurled himself upon Mathy, whose figure, apparently clothed in silks of strange colors, he could see beside him.

"You fiend! You devil!" he snarled. "Do with me what you will, but leave Jerry untouched."

His fingers closed upon the soft throat of the author. There was a crash of glassware and a thunder of chairs overturned.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see that the dining-hall had closed once more about them. He and Mathy were writhing in a tangle of dishes and napery while the other guests crowded about, trying to tear them apart.

"You fool! You utter fool!" he heard Brown shouting. "You almost killed them all. Get back, you fellows. Let me beat some reason into his young head. Damn me if I'll have rebellion among the rebels! It's my will that rules here. Back, I say!"

With a superhuman effort Stanley scrambled to his feet. He had gone berserk. Those crooked, vulpine faces about him seemed birds of prey, ready to tear his very soul to tatters.

With the strength of despair he gripped the now conscious Mathy by the heels and used the body as a flail to sweep a path before him toward the door.

He sensed that the others were reaching skinny fingers toward him. He saw Brown, all his suavity vanished, his face a mask of death, dancing about, a rapier in his hand, trying to get an opening.

And now, for the first time, he saw what was wrong with his host's feet.

The revelation drove him completely mad. He hurled the limp form of Mathy through the doorway, which had been blocked by the hunchback butler and a group of other horrors,

evidently from the servants' quarters, and leaped after it.

A lithe form dropped on his back from above, choking him, as he crashed against the entrance door. He heard the fellow's skull crush against the jamb.

By a miracle the door was unlocked. He dashed into the street and across it, toward his apartment. He couldn't resist turning to look back, however, and saw the whole ghastly crew piling through the door into the dim light of dawn.

That look almost proved his undoing, for some dim form gripped his leg and tripped him. The mob was on him, pulling at his clothes, scratching at his throat, and only prevented from killing him by their numbers and excitement.

Squirming and kicking he fought his way across the dim street. If he could gain his apartment! If he could call Jerry! If he could reunite the chain of the everyday world he knew he would be safe.

At the door he fought them off a moment and snatched his telephone. "Humboldt 5225," he panted.

He heard the crash of the door as his enemies broke it down. He felt them upon him. The end had come!

Then, like a voice from heaven, he heard Jerry on the wire.

"It's Stanley, darling," he screamed. "Promise you won't read the letter from me that you will receive this morning, Jerry. Promise me that."

A skinny claw clutched the receiver but he held fast and as he fell beneath a stunning blow on the head rolled against the wall so they could not reach the cord.

"What on earth is that noise?" he dimly heard the girl answer. "Why of course I won't read the letter, silly. Are you ill? What makes you shout so?"

He could not answer, but as his senses reeled into darkness he felt the pressure about him relax; the blows upon his head cease. He had won back to the world of everyday, where demons in human form could not yet approach.

THE CROW

By LIDA WILSON TURNER

A blue-black crow, like the raven of Poe,
Came one day to my patio,
And perched on top of the white-washed wall.
With a knowing look, he surveyed it all:
The pool where the water hyacinths grow,
The vine swung low, where I came to sew
In the early evening's coral glow.

I saw by his face he deemed it no place
For a bird of his morbid, foreboding race;
He flew to the brooding woods near by,
Where pines grow black on the sunset sky.
Then with a grimace, I tried to retrace
My rosebud pattern outlined with lace,
But a blue-black feather covered the space!

The Moon of Skulls

(Continued from page 751)

ing when he sought to raise them to his aching, throbbing head.

He lay in utter darkness but he could not determine whether this was absence of light, or whether he was still blinded by the blow. He dazedly collected his scattered faculties and realized that he was lying on a damp stone floor, shackled by wrist and ankle with heavy iron chains which were rough and rusty to the touch.

How long he lay there, he never knew. The silence was broken only by the drumming pulse in his own aching head and the scamper and chattering of rats. At last a red glow sprang up in the darkness and grew before his eyes. Framed in the grisly radiance rose the sinister and sardonic face of Nakari. Kane shook his head, striving to rid himself of the illusion. But the light grew and as his eyes accustomed themselves to it, he saw that it emanated from a torch borne in the hand of the queen.

In the illumination he now saw that he lay in a small dank cell whose walls, ceiling and floor were of stone. The heavy chains which held him captive were made fast to metal rings set deep in the wall. There was but one door, which was apparently of bronze.

Nakari set the torch in a niche near the door, and coming forward, stood over her captive, gazing down at him in a manner rather speculating than mocking.

"You are he who fought the men on the cliff." The remark was an assertion rather than a question. "They said you fell into the abyss—did they lie? Did you bribe them to lie? Or how did you escape? Are you a magician and did you fly to the bottom of the chasm and then fly to my palace? Speak!

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Kane remained silent. Nakari cursed.

"Speak or I will have your eyes torn out! I will cut your fingers off and burn your feet!"

She kicked him viciously, but Kane lay silent, his deep somber eyes boring up into her face, until the feral gleam faded from her eyes to be replaced by an avid interest and wonder.

She seated herself on a stone bench, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin on her hands.

"I never saw a white man before," she said, "Are all white men like you? Bah! That can not be! Most men are fools, black or white. I know most black men are fools, and white men are not gods, as the river tribes say—they are only men. I, who know all the ancient mysteries, say they are only men.

"But white men have strange mysteries too, they tell me—the wanderers of the river tribes, and Mara. They have war clubs that make a noise like thunder and kill afar off—that thing which you held in your right hand, was that one of those clubs?"

Kane permitted himself a grim smile.

"Nakari, if you know all mysteries, how can I tell you aught that you know not already?"

"How deep and cold and strange your eyes are!" the queen said as if he had not spoken. "How strange your whole appearance is—and you have the bearing of a king! You do not fear me—I never met a man who neither loved nor feared me. You would never fear me, but you could learn to love me. Look at me, white man—am I not beautiful?"

"You are beautiful," answered Kane.

Nakari smiled and then frowned. "The way you say that, it is no compliment. You hate me, do you not?"

"As a man hates a serpent," Kane replied bluntly.

Nakari's eyes blazed with almost insane fury. Her hands clenched until the long nails sank into the palms; then as quickly as her anger had arisen, it ebbed away.

"You have the heart of a king," she said calmly, "else you would fear me. Are you a king in your land?"

"I am only a landless wanderer."

"You might be a king here," Nakari said slowly.

Kane laughed grimly. "Do you offer me my life?"

"I offer you more than that!" Kane's eyes narrowed as the queen leaned toward him, vibrant with suppressed excitement. "White man, what is it that you want more than anything else in the world?"

"To take the white girl you call Mara, and go."

Nakari sank back with an impatient exclamation.

"You can not have her; she is the promised bride of the Master. Even I could not save her, even if I wished. Forget her. I will help you forget her. Listen, white man, listen to the words of Nakari, queen of Negari! You say you are a landless man—I will make you a king! I will give you the world for a toy!

"No, no! Keep silent until I have finished," she rushed on, her words tumbling over each other in her eagerness. Her eyes blazed, her whole body quivered with dynamic intensity. "I have talked to travelers, to captives and slaves, men from far countries. I know that this land of mountains and rivers and jungle is not all the world. There are far-off nations and cities, and kings and queens to be crushed and broken.

"Negari is fading, her might is crumbling, but a strong man beside her queen might build it up again—might restore all her vanishing glory. Listen, white man! Sit by me on the

throne of Negari! Send afar to your people for the thunder-clubs to arm my warriors! My nation is still lord of central Africa; together we will band the conquered tribes—call back the days when the realm of ancient Negari spanned the land from sea to sea! We will subjugate all the tribes of the river, the plain and the sea-shore, and instead of slaying them all, we will make one mighty army of them! And then, when all Africa is under our heel, we will sweep forth upon the world like a hungry lion to rend and tear and destroy!"

Solomon's brain reeled. Perhaps it was the woman's fierce magnetic personality, the dynamic power she instilled in her fiery words, but at the moment her wild plan seemed not at all wild and impossible. Lurid and chaotic visions flamed through the Puritan's brain—Europe torn by civil and religious strife, divided against herself, betrayed by her rulers, tottering—aye, Europe was in desperate straits now, and might prove an easy victim for some strong savage race of conquerors. What man can say truthfully that in his heart there lurks not a yearning for power and conquest? For a moment the Devil sorely tempted Solomon Kane; then before his mind's eye rose the wistful sad face of Marylin Taferal, and Solomon cursed.

"Out on ye, daughter of Satan! Avaunt! Am I a beast of the forest to lead your black devils against mine own race? Nay, no beast ever did so. Begone! If you wish my friendship, set me free and let me go with the girl."

Nakari leaped like a tiger-cat to her feet, her eyes flaming now with passionate fury. A dagger gleamed in her hand and she raised it high above Kane's breast with a feline scream of hate. A moment she hovered like a shadow of death above him; then her arm sank and she laughed.

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Nakari laughed as Kane tore savagely at his shackles. She crossed to the door, opened it, then hesitated and turned back for another word.

"This is a foul place, white man, and maybe you hate me the more for chaining you here. Maybe in Nakari's beautiful throneroom, with wealth and luxury spread before you, you will look upon her with more favor. Very soon I shall send for you, but first I will leave you here awhile to reflect. Remember—love Nakari and the kingdom of the world is yours; hate her—this cell is your realm."

The bronze door clanged sullenly, but more hateful to the imprisoned Englishman was the venomous, silvery laugh of Nakari.

TIME passed slowly in the darkness. After what seemed a long time the door opened again, this time to admit a huge black who brought food and a sort of thin wine. Kane ate and drank ravenously and afterward slept. The strain of the last few days had worn him greatly, mentally and physically, but when he awoke he felt fresh and strong.

Again the door opened and two great black warriors entered. In the light of the torches they bore, Kane saw that they were giants, clad in loin-cloths and ostrich plume headgear, and bearing long spears in their hands.

"Nakari wishes you to come to her, white man," was all they said, as they took off his shackles. He arose, exultant in even brief freedom, his keen brain working fiercely for a way of escape.

Evidently the fame of his prowess had spread, for the two warriors showed great respect for him. They motioned him to precede them, and walked carefully behind him, the points of their spears boring into his back. Though they were two to one, and he was unarmed, they were taking no chances. The gazes they directed at him were full of awe and suspicion, and Kane decided that Nakari had told the truth when she had said that he was the first white man to come to Negari.

Down a long dark corridor they went, his captors guiding him with light prods of their spears, up a narrow winding stair, down another passageway, up another stair, and then they emerged into the vast maze of gigantic pillars into which Kane had first come. As they started down this huge hall, Kane's eyes suddenly fell on a strange and fantastic picture painted on the wall ahead of him. His heart gave a sudden leap as he recognized it. It was some distance in front of him and he edged imperceptibly toward the wall until he and his guards were walking along very close to it. Now he was almost abreast of the picture and could even make out the mark his dagger had made upon it.

The warriors following Kane were amazed to hear him gasp suddenly like a man struck by a spear. He wavered in his stride and began clutching at the air for support. They eyed each other doubtfully and prodded him, but he cried out like a dying man, and slowly crumpled to the floor, where he lay in a strange unnatural position, one leg doubled back under him and one arm half sup-

porting his lolling body. The blacks looked at him fearfully. To all appearances he was dying, but there was no wound upon him. They threatened him with their spears but he paid no heed. Then they lowered their weapons uncertainly and one of them bent over him.

Then it happened. The instant the black stooped forward, Kane came up like a steel spring released. His right fist following his motion curved up from his hip in a whistling half-circle and crashed against the black giant's jaw. Delivered with all the power of arm and shoulder, propelled by the upthrust of the powerful legs as Kane straightened, the blow was like that of a slung-shot. The negro slumped to the floor, unconscious before his knees gave way.

The other warrior plunged forward with a bellow, but even as his victim fell, Kane twisted aside and his frantic hand found the secret spring in the painting and pressed. All happened in the breath of a second. Quick as the warrior was, Kane was quicker, for he moved with the dynamic speed of a famished wolf. For an instant the falling body of the senseless black hindered the other warrior's thrust, and in that instant Kane felt the hidden door give way. From the corner of his eye he saw a long gleam of steel shooting for his heart. He twisted about and hurled himself against the door, vanishing through it even as the stabbing spear slit the skin on his shoulder.

To the dazed and bewildered warrior, who stood with weapon upraised for another thrust, it seemed as if the white man had simply vanished through a solid wall, for only a fantastic picture met his gaze and this did not give to his efforts.

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Haunted Hands

(Continued from page 761)

until she had fallen asleep and then had crept up to her soft throat.

"On and on that wild song of triumph played, whispering its ghastly tale to me, hour after hour until, numb with exhaustion, I managed to tear myself away from the piano. I did not look at her. I knew only too well what had happened. I rushed out into the street, brought you gentlemen here, and the rest you know.

"I suppose you will want to place me under arrest, now, charge me with murder and go through with all the formality of the law. Do so, if you wish. It matters very little what you do with me. The end is only a matter of a few hours at best. Very soon, now, I must sleep. And when I sleep again, he will conquer. That is one of the things he told me through that hellish music last night.

"And I am anxious to have it over with, to go to her out there in the dark and stand beside her when she faces him and his followers from the Pit. And, somehow, I *know* that, out there, we shall win. She said that love is the greatest power in the universe—that no power of hell could overcome a love like ours. And I believe! Yes, yes, I am quite anxious to have it over with and go to her out there where she is facing him."

The man broke off and stared almost placidly into the gray dawn that was breaking through the windows. The captain of detectives blew his nose quite ostentatiously when he produced his handkerchief, but Cardigan and the other patrolman were frankly wiping their eyes.

"You poor devil!" It was the doctor who spoke. "And all the time you never thought of the one simple thing that would have saved you. Ropes, man! And that's what we'll

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912.

Of Weird Tales, published monthly at Indianapolis, Indiana, for April 1, 1930.

State of Illinois } ss.
County of Cook }

Before me, a notary public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Wm. R. Sprenger, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Weird Tales and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are:

Publisher—Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Editor—Farnsworth Wright, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Managing Editor—None.

Business Manager—William R. Sprenger, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member must be given.)

Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Wm. R. Sprenger, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Illinois.

Farnsworth Wright, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Illinois.

George M. Cornelius, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Indiana.

George H. Cornelius, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Indiana.

P. W. Cornelius, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Indiana.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state). None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the six months preceding the date shown above is_____. (This information is required from daily publications only.)

WM. R. SPRENGER,
Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of April, 1930. D. G. WIELAND.

[SEAL] Notary Public.

My commission expires December 11, 1933.

do with you now. Down at the station house we'll tie your hands to a bunk—even chain them if it will make you feel any better—and you can sleep for a week if you like. After that, you'll have to go through a trial, of course, but it will be very brief. A mere formality. In next to no time, you'll be out of it and in a comfortable sanitarium where you can receive treatment. And there's always hope, young man, always hope. Can't make any promises, of course—unusually severe case of hallucinations, induced by severe mental shock—but there's always hope. Yes, certainly there's always hope."

He cleared his throat briskly and fingered the leaves of his notebook. The man shook his head gently.

"You simply don't know him. You could set these hands into a concrete wall and still they would do his bidding. If—if you had heard them playing a few hours ago, you would understand. . . ."

IT WAS quite early the next afternoon when Dr. Hughes entered the station house—much earlier than his round of duties called for. Cardigan was bending over a newspaper as he entered.

"Well, Cardigan," the doctor asked, "how is our young man today?"

Cardigan looked up from the newspaper with bewilderment written large upon his face.

"Well—'tis a strange thing that has happened, Doctor. The lad is dead. You remember how we handcuffed his hands to the sides of his bunk, and, besides that, set that young rookie to watch beside him? Well, the rookie reports that about ten o'clock he got up and went to the end of the cell corridor for a drink of water. He swears that he was not gone more than three and a half or four minutes at the most, but when he got back, the lad was

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strangled to death. And, Holy Mother, but you ought to see the lad's throat, sir! It's mangled worse than *hers*, sir. And"—Cardigan cleared his throat nervously—"and—well, the rookie *says*, sir, that the lad's hands were still moving although the lad himself was lying perfectly still. 'Tis a strange business, indeed, Doctor, and would you be having a look at this, sir?"

He handed the doctor the newspaper he had been reading and pointed to a small item at the bottom of the page. It was a single paragraph and was dated the day before:

TURGOT, N. Y., August 11, 19—. A curious matter occurred here, today, where the old Turgot cemetery is being moved to make way for the new dam. One of the graves opened was that of Wladimir Tchianski, one of the greatest pianists of his day. His skeleton was found to be in perfect condition except for the bones of the hands. From the wrists down, the bones of both hands were missing and in their place was a peculiar green slime which emitted a powerful stench when the grave was opened. Local authorities think it the result of some little known disease and are attempting to analyze the green slime. So far their efforts have met with no success.

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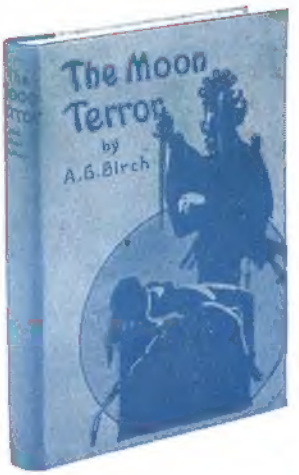

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